Nobody Knows

hernamewasalice

Star Wars - All Media Types

Complete

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Summary

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Description:

Nobody knows that the loving wife of Ben Solo was kidnapped as a teenager. Nobody knows. Not their family or closest friends. Not even their twelve year old son, Benny.

1. Cookie Cutter Family

Benjamin Solo Junior (Benny for short) knew he was lucky. It didn't occur to him how lucky he was until he got older. He's the only kid in his group of friends that has both of parents in his life. In his group of three friends (with him it makes four), he's the only one who doesn't have a dead parent or a dead beat dad or divorced parents or abusive parents or parents who were unhappily married. His parents were madly in love with one another and rarely fight. Out of the twelve years of his existence, he's only experienced mom and dad fighting twice but they always make up within an hour.

His dad doesn't leave for weeks doing who knows what or comes back with some other woman's perfume like his friend Greg's dad.

And his mom isn't an alcoholic like Joss's mom (her full name is Jocelyn).

Benny's parents were kinda perfect. He would never say this out loud though. It's not something you should say because not everyone was fortunate. The last thing he wanted to do was make his friends sad. His parents had taught him to be humble and kind and he goes by this ceremoniously.

The only time that he didn't was when he was in Kindergarten (which this really doesn't count since he was five). Five year old him used to go around telling the other kids that he had the prettiest mom until his mom taught him not to. But it was true though. He does have the prettiest mom because all the other PTA moms were envious of her youthful beauty. She looks young still as if she's still in her early twenties. His mom has high cheek bones, bright soft skin, wide green eyes, and the prettiest smile. She's so slender and slim that strangers are always in disbelief that she was his mom. People always think that she's his big sister.

His mom is what all moms should be, loving and caring. She makes sure the house is kept to shape while being an active member of the PTA and the community center while making sure she was there for the family. She's a great cook unlike his friends' moms. She's the only mom in the bunch that doesn't feed her kids take out or frozen dinners or burns every dish including toast or forget to come at home and feed her family. His friends look forward to sleepovers at his house (which he holds them once a month since he was five years old). They love being at his house than their owns because they feel safe there and they feel comfortable to even ask for advice from both of his parents.

Hell, to think of it, him and his group mostly hang out at his house. Benny doesn't mind it though because his home is a safe place. There's no parents fighting and throwing things at each other in the background. His house always had food and was kept clean. His mom was a saint really. She doesn't mind giving rides to his friends whenever their parents forget and she knows what's cool too.

His dad is great too. He has a great relationship with his dad. He doesn't have a dad who's never around like Max's dad. Dad is good looking as much as mom was pretty. He's a bit older than mom and most dads but he's the best looking dad. He isn't overweight or balding like most dads. He doesn't have a pot belly or anything. Dad was fit and still had a full head of hair. Mom was cool but in the cookie cutter way while dad was actually cool. Sure he's embarrassing at times but he's really cool. Dad never loses his temper and he doesn't mind that Benny practices the drums and guitar a lot at home.

In fact, Dad jams with him from time to time. Dad plays bass while he plays guitar. Most kids find that weird but Benny doesn't care. He's happy that his dad wants to spend time with him. He's happy that his dad goes to all of his band recitals and baseball games despite being tired from work. He's happy that his dad is very generous. When he was younger, Dad now and then would take him and his friends to Toys R Us and get them whatever they wanted. Dad knows his friends' situations and does his best to make things better. He never gets mad even when one time Greg accidentally broke a vase. Dad doesn't mind that his

friends are always around. He doesn't mind giving them rides to the arcade and the mall. Hell, he still gets them ice cream if they asked.

Benny can basically go on. Overall, his parents are good people.

Benny takes after his dad. A lot actually. That's why he's Benjamin Solo Junior. He looks exactly like dad down to the pale skin, lean built, and dark curly hair. Well almost. His hair is soft and tamed and not as wild and he has his mom's tiny slender nose. This, Benny is grateful. He's glad he doesn't have the Solo men's large crooked nose gene.

He keeps his hair the same style as dad's, shoulder length and half flipped back to keep the hairs from his eyes.

They both love cult classic movies and rock music. Besides drums and guitar, Benny plays the trumpet at school. He wants to be a musician one day and dad can't help but to be thrilled.

Mom always smiles and calls them Big Benny and Little Benny.

Mom and dad kiss a lot. They kiss more than most parents too because they're still in love.

It grosses Benny out but he never complains. He rather see them kiss than to them fight like Greg's mom and dad. The only time that Benny reacts is when he catches dad slapping or groping mom's ass. Which is kind of often. Dad will stop though if he gets caught though.

Benny's thankful with just that. He shuddered at the memory of him and the gang going to Joss' house and walking in to Joss' mom naked and in a compromising positon with a strange man. It was horrible. Joss' mom and the guy were too drunk to notice they were there and kept going. Naturally the gang ran back to Benny's house in horror. Long story short, mom gave Joss' mom a piece of her mind and doesn't allow

the gang to ever go to Joss' house. Mom rather have all the kids in her house than to be exposed to anything like that.

The whole gang knows about sex. They're twelve and learned about it (just the surface) from health class last year. Like about condoms and saying no and stuff. For Joss, she had to go to an extra meeting because she was a girl and had to learn about periods and stuff.

Mom and dad were especially being extra lovey today because it's his mom's birthday today.

They're PG though, just kissing and no tongue. She's on dad's lap and giggling as he kissed her.

"Gross, come on mom, blow out the candles before it's gone," Benny says as he scrunched up his nose. Mom's birthday is today but they'll have her party with everyone on Saturday. He likes spending time with just the three of them but wished there was a crowed for mom and dad to stop being so damn affectionate. "Come on. You guys are gross." Dad and him had sang her happy birthday like five minutes ago but she had failed to blow her candles because Dad started being all kissy.

"Hey kid if we weren't gross, you wouldn't be born," his dad teases.

Mom chuckled and pulls away to blow out her cake.

"Yay!" Benny says as both him and Dad clapped. He stared eagerly as his mom plucked the wax sticks and began to cut the cake. He and Mom have the same taste in cake, vanilla and strawberries. Dad was more of chocolate person.

They all sat down and took their time eating their cake. Benny was already on his second slice. He couldn't help but to stare in awe at his parents who were giving one another soft smiles. He likes when he gets to see them act like, mom's the most happy when Dad gives her a soft smile.

The moment is cut short though. "Benny are you sure you'll be okay tonight?" Mom asked. Mom and Dad are going out tonight and won't be coming back until tomorrow morning to give Benny a ride to school.

“I’ll be fine,” he laughed. “I’m twelve years old mom. I don’t need Grandma watching me anymore.”

“Are you sure?” she bit her lip. “You know our numbers right? And 911 right?”

“Mom! I have your numbers already saved in my phone,” Benny laughed. “Don’t worry I promise I won’t burn the house or open the door to strangers.”

“I’m sorry your mother’s overprotective,” Dad smirked.

Mom rolled her eyes but her face softened and flushed when she sees Dad wink at her. “I’m sorry, it’s just the first time we’re leaving you alone without any adult supervision.”

“I’ll be fine mom. I won’t throw any wild parties or anything.”

“Yeah, he’s just going to stay up all night playing video games,” Dad teases.

“Stop,” Mom playfully pinched Dad’s nose.

“Don’t worry, I promise I wont,” Benny promises. He’ll only play until midnight. But she doesn’t have to know.

“Promise?” she asked with hope in her eyes.

“Promise.”

Mom kisses him on the cheek. “Don’t be afraid to call us okay.”

Benny nodded.

They continued to eat the cake and the rest of the food that Dad had got from her favorite restaurant. Benny was about to reach for another slice of cake when he notices the candles on the table. It occurred to him that Dad never gets numbered candles, just stick ones. “Hey Mom,” he began. “How old are you?”

His mom laughed gently. “A woman never reveals her age Benny.”

“She’s forever young, Benny,” Dad says.

“Come on, tell me. How old are you?”

She paused for a moment and then spoke. I’m thirty four, honey. “

Benny beamed in pride. “See was it so bad in admitting your age? You’re not even that old.”

“Thanks,” she laughed. “That’s reassuring since I turned a year older.”

“It’s alright,” Dad says, squeezing her hand. “To me, you’ll always be that beautiful young girl I met at the coffee shop.”

Rey is actually twenty eight years old. And Ben is thirty nine years old.

She had Benny when she was sixteen and Ben was twenty seven. On the papers Ben had made out for her, she’s six years older than what she is. It made things easier especially when she got married and gave birth to Benny in a hospital.

Sometimes it amazes her how much her relationship with Ben has changed over the years. She’s in love with him, her husband. Her feelings for him were unconditional for the last ten years. The first two years were something else. The second year was when she slowly fell in love with him. And the first year, it was… something else.

He had kidnapped her a few months before she turned sixteen. He kept her locked up in his basement, the very basement in their house. It’s the very basement that their son uses to practice his music. It was the perfect basement for that because it was soundproof. Their son uses the basement half of the year though because in the summer it gets scorching hot there even with fans and all.

Rey knows it’s soundproof because of all the days she had spent screaming for help before he came back in the night from work.

He had got her pregnant immediately since he had kidnapped her. They didn't know she was pregnant until she started showing symptoms. She remembers it well, remembers him making her take multiple pregnancy tests within several weeks to make sure.

Positive. She was pregnant. Warily she stepped out of the bathroom of the basement and she shows him the stick. She was trembling as she held the test in her hand.

He locked his eyes on the positive sign. He was silent.

She shut her eyes and waited for him to strike her for getting pregnant.

But he doesn't.

Instead he embraces her.

She couldn't help but to wince.

"You're no-ot mad?" she asked, stuttering.

He shook his head and laughed.

Her skin tightened. He sounded gentle. In awe.

"No. I'm not mad. I'm happy."

"You are?"

He laughed again. "Of course I am. You're having my baby, Rey." He kisses her had softly.

She went pale and froze. Did he — did he want to her to keep this? By the way his face was lightening up, she knew the answer. "You — you can't be serious."

"What?"

"You can't bring up the baby in this," she emphasized, pointing at her cell. The basement.

He shook his head. "The baby's not going to be brought up here. The baby will have a room, the spare room. The baby will have a normal upbringing. The baby will go to school and go outside."

Rey couldn't help but to be sad that the baby inside of her was already being treated better than her. "And what about me?"

"You will be given a normal life once you're on good behavior."

Good behavior as in stay with him. Don't run away. Don't tell anyone that he had been keeping her locked up.

"You better go on good behavior soon," he tells her gently, touching her hair. "I want the baby to have a good life. I want the baby to have a mom and dad who love each other very much."

Rey couldn't help but to hit his hand from her.

He snatched her by the wrist. "Don't," he warns, his tone is low.

"No!" she screamed. But it's pointless. No one can hear. "I don't want this baby! I don't want to bring this baby into this."

He smirked. "What are you going to do?"

"I-I'll make myself lo-se the baby," she stammered. They both know she's lying. The idea of harming her and another life was traumatizing as it is.

"If you do, I'll get you pregnant again. Over and over if I have to until you decide to keep the baby."

She became quiet. She knows that he's not lying. And she knows that he's not going to let her go.

He kisses her gently.

She's still when he does this. Always.

"I'll give you a choice."

Rey forced herself to look into his dark eyes.

“You can either give birth here or in the hospital.”

“Of course the hospital,” she snapped. “That’s a stupid thing to ask.”

“You have to be on good behavior though,” he tells her. “If you want checkups and being allowed to go outside, you have to be good.”

“Are you honestly going to threaten your child’s health?”

“No, but are you?”

“Rey, are you alright?” Ben asked as he lightly tapped her shoulder. They were in the car and he was driving to take her to see the city lights.

She pulls away from the memory. “Yes— I’m fine.”

He frowned. He saw right through her. He knows her triggers. One of them is when she’s asked about her age. “I love you, Rey,” he tells her. He keeps his eyes on the road as his free hand reached to hold her. “I love you very much.” He had been violent to her the first months they had known each other but that was years ago, almost twelve years. “I’m not going to ever hurt you again.” He hasn’t. He’s not violent with anyone, not her or their son.

She latches on to him and squeezes tightly. “I love you.”

2. Snowtime

Nobody knows. And she means it. Nobody knows that Rey was abducted by her husband. Not the neighbors. Not the parents of her son's friends. Not even her own friends.

Ben kidnapped her when she was only fifteen years old.

But he was not her captor.

How could he be? He did not take her away from her friends and family. She had none. She was an orphan who ran away from the foster system since she was thirteen. He did not steal the life she was supposed to live. She had nothing before him. She was nothing before him.

Nobody knew that she was taken because she had no one. Nobody knew she was kidnapped because she was reported as a runaway orphan two years back before being taken.

Rey had nothing before Ben. She was nothing.

And then he came and took her as if he was Hades himself whisking Persephone. Or rather, he took her away as if found a lonely runt of the litter alone in a box.

And maybe that's a better suiting description. He was a lonely owner without a pet and she was the unwanted runt who needed a home.

What he did was wrong but his heart is in the right place. He loves her, adores her, takes care of her, and fathered a child with her. He's done things in the past but he was a good man.

She remembers the following events prior before he had taken her. Vividly.

He had been following her around, it occurred to her. This was the third time she had seen him in her vicinity this week. No — he couldn't be. She doesn't know who he is and this town was a small town. She had been jumping town to town since she had ran away and finally found a nice town that was safe for her to live on her own. No, she's just being paranoid — he doesn't speak to her or anything but it's strange that it's the third time she's seen him in the same place as her. Before she used to see him around at least once a week but now it's becoming frequent.

It's not like she could do anything. He's just minding his own business — at the market, at the coffee shop, at the park.

It's just… unsettling.

But maybe they just have the same routes? This town she had recently migrated to is nice, the kind you see in old timey TV shows like Leave it to Beaver. She's managed to find a job too that doesn't require her to be eighteen or ask for papers. It's a small job that pays below minimum wage. But it's something. She works fifteen hours a week working for an autoshop. Four days of the week she goes to clean up the place and take the scraps to a nearby recycling center and brings them supplies. She's even found a good gas station bathroom to sleep in too and found a good park bathroom to sleep in to rotate.

On her free days, she goes to the coffee shop just to be in a warm place that let's her stay there until midnight. She gets the cheapest thing on the menu, a cup of regular coffee for two dollars and thirty cents in order to be allowed to stay. Whenever she's hungry, she goes through her bag of everything bagels and cup of noodles she buys from the marketplace. The coffee shop is nice enough to give her hot water for it. She tries to live affordably in order to be able to save up for a place three years from now when she is eighteen and can rent a place of her own. Maybe in between that she'll be able to find a landlord that's willingly to rent a place to a teenager. Maybe she'll find a place she can afford but she doubts it because it's hard to make it by with minimum wage. She has most of her cash still but she knows that it's not enough for a month's rent. But what she has is enough to buy necessities — pads, toothpaste,

food, shampoo, clothes. Spending her days at the coffee shop is a luxury she knows. Even though she only gets a small plain coffee, it adds up. She goes there three times a week and sometimes treats herself to the expensive cold foods the place has to offer.

That's when she sees him, the man.

He doesn't speak to her or anything, he just happens to be there at the coffee shop too because it's part of his routine too. He goes there once a week with a laptop and a book and does whatever he does. He doesn't bother anyone. He's to himself but Rey couldn't help but to find it odd that lately she's been seeing him more.

Rey's always been hesitant being around men. He's a good looking man. Tall. Broad. Muscular. With dark hair and dark eyes. He's older and seems to have his life put to together. She doesn't know him but there's an aura about him. She's been spending too much time at coffee shops that she's able to read people. Some are here for homework. Some are here for peace or quiet. Some are here to relax or are here to meet up with people or here for free wi-fi. And some are here because they have work and he's one of those people. Rey doesn't even have to peek at his screen to know he's working. He doesn't laugh or giggle when he's with his laptop like the others. He's not stressed out like the college and high school students. He was focused and diligent.

He must be a man of a honorable position, she knew by the way his face creased whenever he touched the keyboard and read every single word presented on his screen.

He looks fairly young, older for sure but young.

She was here because she had nowhere else to go and no place to sit. She goes to the bookstore too but found more peace just sitting down. Sometimes she just sleeps when she's at the coffee shop, with her head resting on the table. She feels more safe to sleep there because she had

built a good relationship with the workers and they keep an eye on her at all times.

The girl with the shoulder length chocolate hair never gives out her name whenever she orders coffee. This is something Ben had noticed early on. She always give different names whenever a worker asked for her name for the order.

Amy. Julie. Brianna. But none was her name. Every time she's here, she's a different name.

Ben couldn't help but to wonder why. And the thing is, she's a regular here for the last few months and yet none of the workers say anything or ask for her name even though the girl does talks to them from time to time.

Maybe because she's private.

The girl is young — she shouldn't be so closed off.

But Ben, despite being perplexed by the girl, was fascinated. She's very odd. She comes here to just sit down with her thoughts with a cup of coffee beside her. He wonders what she's thinking about that keeps her entertained. She comes here with nothing. No phone to fiddle with. No company. No books either. She just sits there and half the time, she sleeps with her head on the table. She doesn't snore or anything, she's very quiet.

Sometimes, she sways with the background music.

It's something at least.

Sometimes, she reads the fliers.

And on occasions, she scribbles something in her notebook. Ben looks forward to this because it's at least some type of mental stimulation.

She comes with a backpack. When she sleeps she uses it as a pillow and a way to make sure her things aren't stolen. She's very cautious, the girl. She always looks so scared. And worn out. She wears pretty much the same thing. Jeans that fit loose on her and an oversized hoodie and beat up sneakers with dangling laces that were close to being ripped out. The only thing that somewhat changed was her shirt. Sometimes she wears black. Sometimes she wears grey.

Ben does his best to not be transparent about staring at her. He stares at her whenever she's not looking. The only time she glances at him is when she's scanning her surroundings before sleeping and afterwards.

He couldn't help but to be interested in her idiosyncrasies. She constantly chews on her nails whenever something is on her mind. She takes off her shoes exactly at three o' clock and doesn't put them on until the shop is near closing. Whenever she's hungry she pulls out a cup of noodles or a bag of sandwich bread or bagels. She's nonchalant about it and no one seems to notice that the girl has all her belongings in that small backpack. He only knows after all the occasions when she pulled out for her jacket and other things fell out along the way like a toothbrush in a traveler's case, a blanket, a hair brush, toothpaste, and other articles of clothing. The strangest thing that fell out of her bag was a package of strawberries.

Sometimes she reads but she reads the same three books from her bag. The books are worn and bruised just like her. She always look so disheveled and wide eyed, like a deer in headlights. Her clothes hang loose on her but he knows that she's small. Very small with freckles scattered about her face. The more he stared at her, the more he liked her face.

She's very small, he can easily take her — it's not like he would. She's so small, it's to a point that she looks malnourished. But she eats, he knew. He watches when she does, pays attention. She eats but it's not enough, it's not the right substance to fuel her body. And worse, she rations. It kills him every time to watch her force herself to stop eating

and put it away. Why does she do that? Why cant she eat until she was full? Why does she stop herself? Why?

This was one of many questions that he had about her. What was her name? How old was she? What does she do outside of this coffee shop? Where does she go? Where does she live?

The night Rey was taken is forever etched in her mind.

But it doesn't haunt her like it once did.

If Ben never taken her, she would never have Benny. And she loves her son.

Christmastime is Benny's favorite time of the year. The first day of December, Mom and Dad and him drive up to a Christmas tree farm that's three hours away. Sure you can get a precut tree at any parking lot of a supermarket but there was something magical about driving up to a farm for it. Atmospheric. Serene. Mom always make sure she brings carrots and apple slices for the animals and she makes her famous sandwiches for the drive. Tea sandwiches she calls them, were the kind of sandwiches you see at a fancy tea party — no crust and cut up into tiny squares, cucumber and watercress, egg salad, cream cheese and smoke salmon, and meats cut into ribbon strips. Dad loves them, gobbles the whole thing if you're not careful.

Also the first week of December they take family pictures to send out as cards. Always. Every single year for as long as he can remember. The family picture is just Mom and Dad and him. It would be nice if they could get Grandma and Grandpa and Grandpa Luke (Benny calls him grandpa out of respect since he is Grandma's brother) but it's never going to happen. Grandpa Luke is always traveling due to work and Grandpa and Grandma are divorced and can't stand being in the same room together.

Benny doesn't mind though.

Sure, he's getting too old for it but it makes Mom happy.

Because even though it's a picture of three, the picture's whole. Their family of three is complete. Greg's family takes family photos too but you can see right through the fake smiles that the family was unhappy. Greg's family consisted of his mom and good for nothing dad who's not exactly loyal, his older sister Val who's too absorbed with high school to be involved, and his older brother John who's constantly switching majors and always bringing a different girl every year for their Christmas photos. Out of his group, Benny is the only one that's an only child. Max has two half brothers while Joss has an older sister that cut ties with them two years back. Joss couldn't blame her older sister Ash. Ash had to be the adult since their mom was always drunk or going on dates. Joss doesn't hate that her sister left, she's just sad that Ash didn't take Joss with her.

From the beginning, the gang knew their families celebrated the holidays differently. Greg's family is Jewish and Max spends Christmas house hopping. Relative to relative. Joss's family (when her sister was still around) celebrated Christmas but they never get a tree because Joss' mom thinks it's too commercial. Joss always wanted a real tree though or a fake one at least but it's too expensive. Every year, Benny would help her draw and paint a Christmas tree out of butcher paper and tape it on the wall. Other than that, Christmas for her is great because her whole family comes by and they have a big potluck and watch movies and her mom even dresses up and is happy. But since her sister had left, Christmas hasn't been the same.

Christmas in the Solo house lasted a whole month. They decorate their tree with popcorn string and all and have an advent calendar. The advent calendar in the Solo house consisted more than just bite size chocolate. There's little presents — not big ones — little ones. Little presents like mittens and new ornaments to add to the tree until Christmas. A week before Christmas, they go ice skating and go see snow. On actual Christmas, it's the calmest day of the month. On actual

Christmas they stay at home all bundled up watching Elf and Charlie Brown Christmas and bake cookies.

He would never tell Max and Greg but he still loves that stuff. He loves spending a whole day with his Mom and Dad decorating the tree, making sure there were ornaments in every layer of the tree. He loves making special holiday cookies and classic Christmas meals with Mom and giving them out to the community center and the homeless shelter. He loves it when they go driving around looking at other people's houses and seeing their decorations. He loves it because he knows that Dad never had any good Christmases. Growing up Dad had to house jump with his parents and never had any traditions. Benny loves Christmas because Dad makes it magical. Dad gives his all to their family.

If you asked Benny who loved each other more, he would say it's Dad. It's not even a question. Dad loves Mom more. Everyone knows that. It doesn't mean that Mom doesn't love Dad, it's just Dad loves her more. Dad lights up the most when he's around her. He always gives her his full attention and whenever she's a few feet away from him, he watches her from the corner of his eyes. Dad is very protective of Mom and him but it's a good kind of protective, the warm and nurturing kind. Dad is very affectionate with Mom, he cuddles her and holds her in his arms.

That's why Christmas is a big thing around the Solo household. Dad makes Christmas grand because Mom never had any Christmases.

Seeing his wife take care of their son makes his heart smile. She's so delicate with their three month old baby. She loves him, Ben knew by the way she softened whenever she had their son in her arms. Which is always. She always had Benny bundled up and in her arms. She's a good mother. She's attentive and nurturing. It's like second nature to her. Ben's

not sure if it's because it's instinct or it's because she's been around babies her whole life when she was part of the foster care system.

Rey loves being a mom, Ben knew. She stopped complaining about being impregnated so young and she never says anything about waking up every few hours to feed and change their baby.

Ben helps out too whenever he comes home from work even though she always insists for him to rest and relax.

"Sweetheart I don't mind," he chuckled as gently took their baby from her. Their baby was crying but Ben knew how to soothe him. He rocked their son back and forth as he reached for a pacifier. He ignores the sight of Rey's face crumpling before him. He's used to it now, her being terrified that he'll hurt their son. But Ben isn't hurt. He knew the best thing he can do is to show her that she can trust him with their son. Their son stopped crying and slightly, she sighs.

"You work so much — I don't want you to be tired —

"It's fine. I look forward in spending time with him."

"You do?"

He nodded and pressed a kiss on her forehead. "And you too."

She's a wonderful girl— Ben can't stress that enough. It's more than he can ask for. Ben works five days a week from nine to six. Rey spends more time with the baby because of it and manages to take care of the house and do errands and always make sure there is food on the table for when Ben comes home. She's a good mother but sometimes it's hard for Ben to see her as one.

When she holds their baby, it reminds Ben of a little girl playing with a doll. It especially feels that way when he sees her delight in putting their son in different clothes and costumes and taking a million pictures. Maybe it's because she's so small. When he looks at her, it's still hard for him to process that a baby came out of her.

It was a miracle itself that she was able to carry their baby to full term.

But whenever her struggles to see her as a mother, he focuses on her adoration towards their son.

Ben just wished she looked at him like that.

He hasn't completely won her over yet. But she's coming around to him though, whenever he wants to have sex with her she complies without any refusal and whenever he wants to speak to her, she speaks back in conversations.

The first sign that she was beginning to fall for him was on December 1st, Benny's first Christmas. Benny was only three months old at the time.

Ben remembers the moment vividly, like the back of his hand.

The day before, on November 30th, when he came back from work, Rey was acting very different. Peculiar almost.

The second he opened the door, she came to him skittering about, holding their baby in their arms. This was new, she never came to him this fast before. Ben smiled and stared at his son. Their baby was fast asleep in her arms, all bundled up. "Hi sweetheart, how's Ben Junior —

She kissed him immediately to his surprise.

He pulled back. "What's going on?" he chuckled. This was new.

"Nothin-g!" she stammered, her cheeks reddening. "It's just -it's just —

"Just what?" he asked calmly.

She went quiet.

He raised his eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

“It’s just — it’s —

She stopped herself from speaking again.

Ben frowned. “Here, let’s put Ben Junior in his crib and talk just the two of us.”

She nodded and for once, willingly detached herself from their son.

Something was off.

“Honey, what’s going on?” he asked. Rey began to bite at her nails. He took her hand away and stopped her. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She nodded, her cheeks becoming more scarlet. “I was wondering — I know this is a lot, but if we can get a real Christmas tree for Christmas. I know it’s expensive but it can be small — I don’t mind — I just want Benny to have a real nice tree for his first Christmas.”

“Benny?”

She nodded. “Our baby. I decided today that I’ll call him Benny. I think it’s cuter and less formal than calling him Ben Junior.”

Ben smiled and touched her cheek. She looks so cute when she’s flustered. “I like that. Benny.”

“So what do you think? Do you think we can get a tree?” she asked nervously.

“We can.”

Just like that, her eyes lit up.

“You didn’t have to ask me,” he laughed. “I gave you a card for a reason.”

“I know but that’s a very big purchase.”

“You don’t have to worry about money,” he reminded her. She’s always careful with spending money from being homeless for two years.

“And I don’t care what you buy, I trust you and your judgement.”

“I know — it’s just you hate Christmas.”

He laughed. “I don’t hate Christmas.” He’s just not as festive like most people. He hates the whole cheese fest. He hates hearing Christmas songs everywhere he goes from November to December. He hates waiting in lines for presents. He hates seeing people acting so phony and chummy for that one day of the year. He feels the same about every holiday.

“Your mom says you do.” Rey knew damn well that Ben avoided the last eight years at his parents’ homes during the holidays. She doesn’t blame him though that he doesn’t want to deal with his parents’ new spouses and family and the fact that even though his parents are with other people, they were still in love. At least Ben drops by for five minutes and gives presents before leaving.

“I just hate the over commercialization of it.”

“And trees are part of that category,” she countered. “Would you mind it though?”

“Mind what?”

“If we celebrated Christmas — together.”

He loves her so much that he says yes. “I promise I’ll be a good sport,” he vows giving his tense wife a hug. He hates seeing her like that. He hates that she’s so nervous and scared for asking for something. He wants her to be comfortable around him, to be okay with wanting things. “So what kind of things do you have planned? Or traditions that you want to pass on to Benny?” Benny. He likes that nickname. It was sweet, just like their baby.

She shrugged. “I don’t have any but I have some ideas that I want to do. I’ve been looking at pinterest lately and watching a lot of Christmas specials.”

“For real? They’re already showing Christmas specials — wait what do you mean that you don’t have any traditions?”

“I never really celebrated Christmas.”

He blinked several times. “You never?”

She raised her eyebrow. “I thought it was obvious.”

“But they must have given you presents at least —

“At the group homes, there were never enough donation presents and I always gave them to the younger kids.”

“What did you do on Christmas then?”

“The adults ruining the homes would put on a few Christmas specials back to back and give us hot chocolate and cookies while we colored on the printed Christmas coloring pages. Some years, they’ll take us to the retirement center to spend time with the elderly to sing Christmas carols and cheer them up.”

Ben couldn’t help but to smile. He could see it, child her trying to make the best of everything by putting others first. He loved that about her. Even though he supports her, she still helps around at shelters and centers. Unlike other people who only do that once a year, she does it weekly. “That’s not nothing, that’s something. That sounds like a nice Christmas.”

“Yeah but I always wanted a family during Christmas to spend time with to have traditions with. The thing about the foster system is that the kids you get to know won’t always stay. They’ll get adopted or be transferred somewhere else. And that’s the same thing for the retirement center, because they’re there for a reason. They’re sick. They won’t make it long. All I wanted is to have someone that will always be there so we can spend the holidays together.”

“I’m sorry that you never got to have a family.” It breaks his heart how nonchalantly she says it. It sounded so sad to him because it sounded that she accepted it years ago that she wasn’t going to have a

Christmas like all the people she seen outside the homes and the people on TV and movies.

She laughed softly.

And that surprises him.

He looked up at her. "What's so funny?"

"I do have a family now."

She looks so peaceful when she sleeps. She's looks so innocent with her eyelashes hitting her cheeks, curled up into a ball. He stares at her for a while before he wakes her up. "Sweetheart wake up," he said as gently shook her. It's five in the morning and her body doesn't wake unless the baby cries for milk.

"Mm?" she asked groggily, half asleep.

"Sweetheart," he shook her again.

"Yes?" she asked yawning.

"Get ready."

"Why?"

"We're going to get a tree today," he whispered, chuckling as he watched her pull the covers over her face.

The second it occurred to her what he said, she sat up immediately, untangling herself from the covers in panic and bewilderment. "Really? Together?"

Ben laughed. Her mannerisms were of an excited child but he couldn't help but to find it endearing. He always did. "Yes, sweetheart," he said.

To her surprise, he's holding their baby. Benny was dressed in long pants, a long sleeve shirt, and a jacket and socks and a beanie. Benny was quiet for Ben was feeding him with leftover breastmilk in a bottle.

“Why did you dress him so warmly?” she asked, raising her eyebrow. And that’s saying a lot from her since she’s always doting about whether their son was cold.

“You’ll see, just get ready. I already laid out some clothes for you.”

She does so without any questions. She gets into the car after buckling up Benny without asking why they were up so early.

“Where are we going?” she asked the second they past the parking lot of Christmas trees.

Ben chuckled. “We’re going to get a tree.”

“You just past the lot —

“It’s alright. They’re other lots.”

Rey didn’t start to worry until the minutes turned into two hours. “Where are we going?” she asked. It was getting cold to a point Ben had to turn up the heater to keep Benny warm.

“We’re going to get a tree.”

“Can you at least tell me where?”

“No,” he smirked.

Rey sighed. “Can we at least stop for a bit? I want to feed Benny and change his diaper.”

He nodded and stopped by a McDonald’s. “I’ll get us some food while you feed Benny. What do you want?” he asked as Rey went to the backseat to feed her baby. She has a cover on.

“Hashbrowns and orange juice.”

“What else?” That’s not enough for a woman who’s breastfeeding.

She shrugged. “Surprise me.”

After they ate, he continued driving. It got colder and colder the more he drove. The more he drove, the more the ground started to be covered in more and more white. Snow. She's never seen snow before other than the movies. "It's pretty," she said softly at the sight of beds and beds of it. She sat up right away the second she sees a tree farm but to her dismay, he passes it.

"I thought we're going to get a tree —

"Yes, but on the way back."

"Where we going?"

"I rented a cabin for us for the weekend, it's another two hours away."

"Really?" she asked doubtfully.

"I wanted you to experience snow longer than an hour," he said as he reached for her hand.

"But we can't. I didn't pack —

"I already packed. Our bags are in the trunk." Thank god for twenty four hours stores. "I even packed some formula just in case."

She looked down and stared at his hand as he interlocked his fingers with hers. She squeezed his fingers tightly and smiled. "Thank you —

The moment is cut by the sound of cries.

"We should probably stop and feed Benny," she said.

Ben laughed. "We'll never make it there will we?"

Rey couldn't help but to smile. "Nope."

When they finally reach to the cabin, it felt surreal. It felt like forever until they got there but now they're here. There was nothing but snow and trees and forests and the little town that's been here for hundreds of

years. Everything the snow touched wrapped around and left intricate designs. It was beautiful. Like a dream. Rey put on a coat on her baby before putting him into the baby carrier that was strapped on to Ben. She pressed her lips together and repressed herself from smiling. It's strange to see a big man with a baby. It reminded her of a mother kangaroo.

"How does it feel?" she asked.

"A bit weird but he's not heavy." Benny was calm, sucking on his pacifier.

"Is it secured?"

"Yes."

Rey tried to get their bags but he stopped her.

"We'll get the bags later," he said gently as he put a coat on her as well. He fastens on her coat with care and gives her knitted gloves to put on. "We already checked in so there's no rush. I want you to enjoy the scenery." He said as he lead her into the woods.

She's very still to his surprise.

"Are you cold?" he asks.

She shook her head as she held her baby tightly. After minutes of carrying Benny, she insisted to hold him. Ben doesn't argue and allows it.

"What's wrong?" he asked as she stood in place. Both of them — his son and wife were strangely quiet. He was about to open his mouth again until he realized that his son and wife were just in awe at the snow. Their eyes are wide and their cheeks were rosy and flushed. Benny looked so much like her whenever he was amazed. Childlike. Loving. Caring.

If he could bottle a memory and replay it over and over, it would be this — watching the people he loved the most experience snow for the

first time together.

Benny and Rey are so overwhelmed that they're still.

"I've never seen snow before," she finally says. She looked up and found the snow was falling from the sky, covering them like sprinkles. It's soft. "Only in movies."

"I know," he said softly. He reached for her hand and held it out for the snow to kiss her fingertips. The ice crystals looked like diamonds in her hair.

The snow fell harder but it remained light.

There were tears trickling from her eyes.

"Why are you crying?" he asked, touching her shoulder. He held his breath at the sight of her tears. He's always been shaken seeing her cry. The most she cried was the first weeks when she was kept in his basement.

"It's nothing —

"Then why are you crying?" he asked desperately. His heart was beating rapidly in panic.

"I'm just happy," she said to him with a shaky smile. "Thank you."

3. Bracelet

Mr. Sandman
Bring me a dream
Make her the cutest that I've ever seen
Give her two lips like roses and clover
And tell her that her lonely nights are over
Sandman
I'm so alone
Don't have nobody to call my own
Please turn on your magic bean
Mr. Sandman
Bring me a dream

— Mr. Sandman covered by SYML

Every mom has a certain thing about them, a thing that helps you spot her in a crowd.

Some kids can find their moms by the smell of their perfume.

But for Benny, he can spot his mom by her bracelet. You see, mom has this bracelet. It's a crystal bracelet with little charms. And she wears it every single day, on her right wrist. Always.

The earliest memory Benny has was when he was three or so and was fascinated by how shiny it was.

They had one Christmas together, just them before Benny was born.

This was before she was pregnant.

Every day that passes, she scratches into the wall and leaves a tally mark with a bobby pin. Every single day. Her eyes roamed and counted every mark, every collection and cluster of five days until she calculated that she had been here for a little over two months.

Rey shut her eyes and sighed. She slumped into her bed and shut her eyes. She's used to having her eyes puffy and swollen but this was the first time that her eyes were dry in a long time. Maybe she toughened up or got used to it or maybe she given up hope — it's hard to tell right now.

The basement is not frightening.

It's actually nice. Spacey. Roomy. She has a bed, a real bed. There's a bookcase filled with books and activities to keep her busy, a little fridge, and even a bathroom for her to fix herself up.

He's not really that bad. Rey knows. He's enamored with her to a point of obsession.

She had heard horror stories of how cruel people can be. Whenever she feels like it's the end of the world, she reminds herself of the news stories she had heard. At least, Ben was not hurting her as much as the men who hurt those women.

Rey is not justifying what he had done to her but at least he hadn't touched her.

He just… keeps her here.

But he's not letting her go out anywhere either.

He… gets her things.

Every single day that he comes back from work, he goes down the basement and greets her and gives her something.

Rey will look at the item in confusion and in defense and ask why and he would always respond: just because. Or he'll respond: it made me

think of you.

Ben gets her things. He gets her clothes. They're not sexual or anything, they're just clothes. Like jackets, sweaters, scarves. Practical. Warm. And pretty. He gets her chocolate. He gets her books. He gets her CDs. He gets her nail polish. He gets her flowers. He gets her things.

They're nice things but it doesn't make up for the fact that she's being held hostage. But every time she sees him come down, every time she sees his face soften at the sight of her as he attempts to surprise her with the item of the day, it makes her feel something.

It's not love or attraction. It's the feeling that he's harmless.

Even though he's capable of so much, he's harmless — that all he wants is her affection.

He likes taking care of her. He gives her food, real food. Good food. He gives her food before he leaves and food when he comes back. Morning he makes something for her and night he gets takeout — Rey feels as if she's a dog explaining this.

But she needs food. No matter how much she resisted, she needs it. It's instinct for her to take the food that's offered because she's homeless. And before that, there wasn't even enough portions in the foster homes. It's instinct for her to get whatever food that she can. But, she's not completely weak. She only eats if they share the same plate and food. Ben knows this and complies. And when he's gone for work, there's food in the fridge and microwave to keep her full until he comes back. He's smart too, it's frozen food and bottled up water that's still in the box so she knows it's safe and not drugged.

He likes taking care of her — she can't stress that enough.

He may not touch her but he forces her in some things.

They might be minor but it's disturbing. He likes holding her and kissing her wrist and brushing her hair. Whenever he does it she can't help but to shudder as he hummed and ran his fingers through her hair

and smell her from to time. She has to remind herself that at least she's not being raped. That at least he's not hitting her.

At least he's not hurting her.

He's just taking care of her because he doesn't like her being on her own. He doesn't like her sleeping in restrooms. He doesn't like her working under the table with an autoshop and getting bruises.

As much as she hated to admit, she was under better care by him than any foster parent she ever had.

He likes talking to her. Even though she doesn't say anything, he talks to her still. As they ate together. Or when he puts something on for them to watch on his laptop. Or when she's about to sleep. He doesn't really seem to care that she refuses to talk to him — that he's pleased just to be around her.

She woke up to something different today.

She wakes up to light. Different colored lights. Yellow. Blue. Red. Green. The colors looked pretty as her eyes settled to adjust. Lights. There were Christmas lights hung all around the basement. Rey immediately sat up in her bed, clinging to her comforter. There were lights and there was a little plastic Christmas tree. It was silver with different colored ornaments. It was a small tiny tree, the size of her arm.

Was it? No it couldn't be. Was it Christmas already?

Rey blinked. Is it? She turned to stare at the tally marks and sighed. She may have been keeping track how long she had been here but have forgotten to keep track day. It's not an important anyways. Christmas was just any other day but it did alarm her how quickly she forgot her sense of time.

"Merry Christmas," she hears his voice echo as he came down to the basement.

She clung on to her comforter tighter.

Breakfast is still the same. He sits next to her and talks while she remained silent. She refuses to speak to him. When she did, it's very rare. He's a monster. He had hurt her. He's holding her hostage.

Breakfast goes like clockwork. The only thing that was different was the two mugs of hot steaming milk. Next to it was a can of whipped cream, a bowl of mini marshmallows, crushed peppermint, and a block of chocolate on a stick for the both of them. Her eyebrows furrowed.

"It's hot chocolate. I figured you would want to fix it yourself."

She keeps her mouth shut. It looked strange to her. She's used to the packets. She had never seen it before, a block of chocolate.

"Don't be afraid," he chuckled. He proceeded to fix himself a cup of hot chocolate. He dipped the block of chocolate into mug and stirred.

Rey couldn't help but to be curious and did the same thing. She followed his order of fixings and waited for him to drink before she did. He then took a sip out of her mug as proof there was nothing wrong with it. She proceeded to drink it. It's rich, richer than any powder mix. It's really good. She wanted to drink the whole thing until he stroked her hair in fondness.

She stopped drinking automatically.

Ben couldn't help but to frown as she pulled away from him. She notices this but she kept quiet.

She stops eating all together.

He keeps going. And talking. "I'm going to be gone for a few hours," he tells her, his eyes lingering on her.

She wrapped herself in the comforter. She wants him gone. She hates the way he looks at her, in want. In yearning. She keeps herself bundled up, she doesn't want to give him any sort of satisfaction.

"I'm going to visit my family but I'll come back."

Rey doesn't say anything because she knows that he likes it when she speaks to him. Even when she says she hates him or that he's a monster, he's pleased that she acknowledges him. If she could, she would ask if his family knew he was keeping a girl locked up.

"I don't want to see them but I have to. I rather spend the whole day with you," he added.

She says nothing.

Her silence stings him like venom.

She knew by the way his face crumples.

"I know you'll miss me," he said confidently.

She lied down and covered herself in the blanket. "You're a pompous bastard," she spat out. She covers herself because she doesn't want to see that small smile of his.

"So I figure it'll be okay if you open just one present early."

Rey couldn't help but to peek her head out. There is a present in his hand, it's small. It fits perfectly in his palm. Her eyes widened at how pretty the wrapping paper was. The paper was white with gold metallic leaves.

"Go ahead," he said gently.

Her eyes flickered to his for a moment in defensive mode.

"It's okay," he gave her a small smile.

She's been given things by him before, but never did he wrap it. She couldn't help it, she wanted to know what was inside. Carefully she unwrapped the paper, putting all her focus on to it as he watched her.

It was a bracelet. A crystal bracelet with little crystal charms. Rey's eyes softened at the sight. Her fingers trembled as she touched it. Never

did she imagine she'll ever get to have something like this. Her eyes flickered and locked onto to his in confusion.

"I remember," he tells her touching her cheek. "I remember how you stop by Tiffany's every day on your way to work and stare at it admiringly," he stroked her cheek. "You looked so sweet, like Audrey Hepburn in Breakfast at Tiffany's."

This was a fortune. She knew she couldn't accept it. She tried to give it back but he refused.

"It's yours." He puts the bracelet on her wrist gently.

She looked down at her wrist. She blinked several times in disbelief. It's beautiful. The crystals felt cool and smooth against her skin and shined brighter than the lights. Lightly she shook her wrist. There's weight to her wrist now. The bracelet decorates her skin. Covers it.

The bracelet covers up the evidence so well.

"You're welcome," he tells her. He doesn't need to hear her speak to know she's grateful. The evidence was written all over her face. Her eyes are gentle and the smallest movements were delicate. "I love you."

Her heart skipped a beat as suddenly the pretty dainty bracelet felt like fifty pounds of glass shards. She looked down at her bracelet. It's pretty but it doesn't cover up how he broke her wrist.

There was a time Rey had escaped. It didn't last long. It was brief.

It was on their first Christmas together. She used to hate herself for a year for being so foolish. She had her chance to be free but she was naïve. She didn't know what she wanted. She was just a little girl. A little girl who was alone with no one.

He is very foolish, she thinks. Since it's Christmas he takes her outside. He takes her around the city for fresh air and to see the pretty lights. This is when she makes her escape.

She runs.

She doesn't look back.

He goes after her.

She ran faster — as fast as she could. She yelled. She yelled for help but no one is there. No one can hear. Everyone is with their family. There was no one in the city right now. But she still screams. "Help!" she shouted from the top of her lungs. "I've been held hostage! Help!" her lungs are burning. "Somebody please help me! He's chasing me!" But no one is there. "Help—

She finds herself at a dead end. She tries to run back but he's already there.

He doesn't look upset.

To her surprise, he looks disturbingly calm.

She stood there unable to stop herself from shaking.

"Nobody's here," he tells her. "They're all with their family and friends."

"Please, I just want to be free."

"And go where? Home? You have no home. You have no family. No friends."

"I don't care, I just want to be free."

"So you rather be out in the streets than to be with me? It's not safe there."

"And what? Being with you is?" she shouted.

No one can hear.

"That was an accident," he said pulling his gaze from her wrist. She still had the bracelet on. "I never meant to hurt you like that. I just want

to keep you safe. I just want to protect you. Nobody loves you the way I do."

"If you love me, why did you take me?" she asked in a low tone. Her chest was constricting. No one… no one has ever told her that they loved her. He doesn't even know her name but he loves her. And she feels it, not just now but always. He loves her.

"Sometimes you have to do things that you don't want to do in order to keep the woman you love safe. Do you honestly think I would be okay sleeping knowing that you're out in the streets? That your life is in constant danger?"

"You're the monster!" she bit every word. "You're the one that I have to fear."

His jaw twitched as his eyes went dark. "Go ahead then. Leave for all I care. I don't care anymore."

He's bluffing, she knew. He's a wolf playing a trick.

She remained in place, waiting for his next move.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. "Go," he ordered.

She didn't. Instead, she blinked. Helplessly like a rabbit.

"What are you doing?" he yelled. He's frustrated. Irritated. "Leave."

She shook her head. "I— I don't know."

"Do you want to stay — is that it?"

"I don't know-w."

"I know you more than that. Do you want to stay with me?"

Rey shut her eyes. "I… don't know." She doesn't. Why isn't she running? Why isn't she going?

"I'll give you a choice. You can either leave or you can stay."

Rey didn't say anything.

“You’re nothing, but not to me. You can continue being nothing or you can have the life you deserve. I’ll take care of you.”

She opened her mouth but paused. She found tears trickling down her face. She expected him to wipe her tears but he doesn’t. He’s serious. He’s very, very upset with her.

“Whatever choice you make right now, it’s final. There’s no going back,” he warned. “I’m either going to not take you back or not letting you go. The choice is yours.”

When he does wipe her tears, it’s her in his arms, sobbing. “It’s alright,” he soothed, stroking her back.

But it’s not. Nobody’s going to love her but him. She knows. She feels it.

“Let’s go home,” he tells her, lifting her in his arms.

For once he feels how small she is, how truly small she is. A little girl. A little lonely girl.

Rey remembers the night Benny was conceived.

For that night fell on her first Christmas with Ben.

He carried her to the car and then carried her back into the basement. And placed her back on to her bed. Or, her first bed. And they conceived their child there, in the basement.

“I do not like putting you here, do you know that?”

She doesn’t respond.

“I don’t like it when you refuse to talk to me either,” he stroked her face. She’s so stubborn. So prideful. But he doesn’t care. He loves her. “But when you prove your loyalty, I’ll let you sleep in the same bed with

me — I'll let you go anywhere you please as long as you come back to me."

She says nothing.

But he's not taken back from it for he feels the loneliness in her. It was the same loneliness he felt when he first followed her and found where she slept and how she cleaned her body. She uses the sink and the hand dryer.

He loves her, no matter how much she pushes him away. No matter how much she hits him and screams how she despises him, he loves her. The loneliness in this very lonely young girl, speaks to him. For he possesses the same sadness.

Sometimes the feeling is too much that he pulls away from her. While his heart possessed hatred and anger, her heart was broken from all the people that left.

"I just want to take care of you. I don't want anything to happen to you. I just want you to be safe."

Rey doesn't know what word struck a nerve with her but one of them does: care, want, safe.

She tries to recall a memory to give her some light but she can't find any. They're aren't any. He's the only that stayed — that refuses to leave her. That keeps her caged up like a precious bird. She clutches on to the bracelet that was latched on to her wrist. This was the closest thing she has to being loved.

But then, he shifts. Shift away. From her. Rey doesn't know why it startles her but it does. Her heart is beating rapidly. Immediately, she lifted her hand from her blanket and slowly held out her hand to him. Her fist uncurls and trembles. For him. She doesn't know why she's doing this but every part of her body was shaking.

"What's wrong?" he looked at her in confusion.

Her fingers began to curl back. She feels rejected. He's just like everyone that comes into her life. He uses her until she has no value. Her eyes began to burn. She wants to put her hand away but she can't. It's still in the air, shaking. She's bringing herself out to him and he's not taking her. He's leaving.

But he's not. He's just standing, staring at her blankly.

"What's wrong?"

Her eyebrows furrowed. She wants to scream. Is it not obvious? She's opening up to him. She's crying, her lips are twitching. She feels like she was seven again begging her temporary foster parent to take her, to adopt her — to take her as one of the family. "Don't. Don—'t go," she said slowly.

She rarely speaks to him. When she does it's special. Even when she's angry. Even when purposely hurts him with her words, it's special. Ben feels that. Feels her heart on her fingertips.

Ben was about to reach for her until he saw the glove that covered his hand. He peeled it off and slowly touched her hand. He touched her finger tips first. A small tap. Her skin is cold and she's shivering. "I won't go," he tells her. "You're cold. Let me bring down the heater —

She shook her head frantically, latching on to his entire hand.

"I will come back," he assured. She looks so frightened. As if he was abandoning her. "I won't leave —

"Rey."

Ben raised his eyebrow. "What?"

She swallowed hard. "My name… is… Rey."

He studied her as she squeezed him tight. She looks so broken, so fragile. Vulnerable. Her green eyes are transfixed upon his, begging for him to stay. And he knew then that she was telling him the truth. "I won't leave… Rey," he said tenderly, saying her name was the first time.

She seems to respond to it, peacefully. Instinctively.

He squeezed her hand then as she sat up straighter.

He blinked.

When she looks at him like that, it's hard for him to believe she's only a girl. With those glossy eyes and long lashes, defined and carved in features, and slender figure — it's hard for him to fathom that she is just fifteen. He couldn't help but to kiss her — but to dip down and kiss those soft pink lips of hers. It's an innocent kiss, a soft peck but she still squeezes his hand. Trembling.

She's so cold.

Even with the comforter wrapped around her.

She's freezing.

He pulls away but she followed, latching to him by her full lips.

It takes him by surprise. It's quick. It's faint. She held on to him. He wrapped his arms around her like he always does. "Have you kissed before?"

"I've been kissed before, numerous times. By older boys, by older men. By temporary foster parents."

This startles him. "Have you kissed anyone back?"

She shook her head.

He touched her cheek with his knuckles. "I shouldn't have kissed you," he mumbled dejectedly.

"Was I not good enough?"

"No — I mean, I —" he was become flustered. This small exchange is evident of her naivety. "It's just I shouldn't have kissed you — I shouldn't have done many things either." Gently he grabbed her wrist and held it to his mouth. He bent down and traced his lips across her wrist. "How is

it?" he asked. They recently took off her cast. A cast that he made for her from looking up instruction videos.

"It's fine." She reached for his scarf and tugged on it lightly. "I can use it fine, see." She demonstrated by slowly unraveling his scarf.

He swallowed hard. He reached for her hand and interlocked it with his.

She squeezes him hard. "Will you ever leave me?"

"No."

She sighed in relief.

"Rey," he called out for her. The name of her tongue warms him. She had opened up to him, given a piece of her.

"Yes?"

"You're cold."

She was. Her skin was like ice.

"I'm used to it," she assured him through chattered teeth.

"Can I hold you?" he asked.

He wants to give her nothing but warmth.

"Rey," he calls out for her again.

She looked up.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. He just wanted to say her name. Rey. Rey. Rey. She had nothing. The only thing she had was her name. And for her to give her name out to him, was a sign that she was letting him in. "Rey," he said again, chuckling. He couldn't help but to find her wide curious gaze endearing. He tilted her chin to watch those pretty eyes go big.

She doesn't know how it happens. It… just did. He kisses her — and now he's on top of her nuzzling her neck.

She's not much help in stopping it. She's the one that pulling off his sweater and shirt. She doesn't know why she's doing it but she does. She kisses him back from time to time when she's not being overwhelmed by the intensity of him.

It's overwhelming. Him gripping on to her. Him rolling his hips against her. Him kissing her and touching her. She doesn't know when he took off her clothes but she's bare underneath him, underneath his dripping sex. He's aroused. Hard. Throbbing. Precum dripping from the tip and on to her skin.

Rey should yell — push him off of her but she doesn't. She couldn't help but to be fascinated in this. In him. He's needy for physical contact. For some validation. Rey couldn't help but to give him that — to go on with it because the look on his face reminded her of herself. He's starving. Desperate. Grateful.

His mouth is everywhere — on her breasts, her mouth, and throat. He keeps kissing her neck. It's very hard to stay still. Her throat is sensitive and his teeth and tongue is ravaging her. "What are you doing?" she asks, squirming as he bit into her skin. It stings.

"I want to leave you some hickeys."

"Hickeys?"

"Love marks."

Before she can respond she winced as he sank his teeth into her, breaking in some flesh. Before she can react he's sucking on the mark and licking it as if she was a wound and he was an animal that received it. It — it feels… nice. She couldn't help but to sigh as he peppered kisses over the mark. He kisses her in a trail as he looked for another spot to mark her.

He's not bad looking, she thinks. It's not the first time she thinks this. She thought about this the first time she had saw him. He's not bad

looking. He's built. He's muscular. He's tall. He's quite attractive — so why does no one want him? Besides this — why didn't anyone want him before? He has a good job, he's very diligent, he's very intelligent.

But maybe it's because he's so quiet. Maybe it's because his stature intimidates people. Or maybe it's because he's very possessive.

Or perhaps all.

She breaks away from her thoughts as she felt fingers trace along her privates. "Have you ever… done this before?" he asked. His fingers are dry and brittle but he's making her wet.

Rey shook her head. She couldn't help but to twitch. What's going on? She looked down and stared at the fingers that was tracing and dipping into her folds. His fingers are so calloused but she's getting very, very wet. Fuck. It felt good. Her cheeks flushed as a moan escaped. And she can tell he likes it too the way he was growling and curling his fingers inside of her to play with her juices.

"Do you… do you want to?" he asked gently, his fingers still inside seeping into her.

"Have you… ever done… this before?"

She shook her head, strumming her fingers along every curve of his muscular shoulders.

"I'll be very gentle, Rey," he promises, rubbing his nose with hers.

Rey nodded. She should have said no but she didn't. She said yes — she doesn't know why.

To her surprise he doesn't do it right away. He touches her still. Touches her hair. Her lips. Her hands. "How's your wrist?" he asks again.

"It's fine —

Ben takes no time in squeezing them to pin her down. She winced. It hurts a bit. "Ben —

But her words are cut abrupt when he leaves her wrist to cup her breasts while the other hand was firmly holding the strong wrist. His hands are large, nearly covers her breasts whole. He breasts are small, tiny mounds but he seems to be very, very content in seeing them for the first time. They're not plump but he makes it feel as they are with the way he was rubbing his face in her breasts and groaning. His breathing is heavy, lazy as he flicked his tongue to touch the point of her breast.

It feels like nothing. Just a tease.

A very warm tease.

He keeps doing it, flicking his tongue but then he latches on to it and sucks on her nipple. He sucks hard. Slurping.

She sucked in some air as her cheeks flushed.

His eyes flickered to hers. "You're very sensitive," he said as he rolled his teeth along her tender nipple. He sucks again the second he finishes his words and plays with the other nipple, swirling with his fingertip.

She keeps her fingers in his hair as he sucked on her. She couldn't help but to let it go on. Watching him intrigued her for he was sucking on her as if her body had something to give. Her breasts are small and have a space in between. Even with a bra on her breasts don't touch. But it doesn't stop him from pressing them together — forcefully for them to touch. He bent down and holds them in place so he can suck on both of her tits. He sucks on her as if he was dehydrated, sucking hard for milk.

She wants to tell him that she has nothing to give but he seems to believe that she can. Her breasts aren't really filling or large but it doesn't stop him. He seems to worship her, every inch of her small boyish bruised up body. She had a lot of scars on her body but those weren't from him. Those were before him from all the fights she got into, from all

the undeserved beatings, and from the advances she managed to escape. The only thing he gave her was on her wrist.

When he unlatches his mouth from her breasts, it stings.

She is welcomed by cold frigid air and the sight of bruises all over her breasts, especially at the tips. Her nipples were red and raw and swollen. He only sucked on her too, sucked her into bruises.

He cups them again before releasing them.

"Rey, I'm so hard," he rasped, rubbing his entire length. He's dripping all over and all over his shaft.

She blushed. "Do you want to?"

"Not yet. Do you?"

She shrugged. "I don't know," she blushed harder.

He kisses her again. "Rey."

"Yes?"

"Do you want a taste?"

She nodded. She tried to sit up but he doesn't let her. Instead he climbed on top of her and slid his erection in between the gap of her breasts.

She blinked several times. He's massive. Long. And thick. He completely fills the space in between her breasts. How thick was he? Like what three inches? He must be like what? Eight inches long? Nine? She's seen penises before, seen them erect too but they were never this large before or this red. She can see it, his veins and reddening even more. It's throbbing in between her breasts, hot and all, dripping beads of pre cum on to her.

"Please sweetheart," he rasped. "Please lick me," he said as he slid his tip closer to her press onto her mouth. "You don't have to suck me right now. I know this position is difficult to."

She does, flicks her tongue out. She can't help it. She wants to — she doesn't know why. But she does, she licks his tip. He tastes salty and sort of sweet. She keeps licking him as he slid back and forth in between her breasts. Several thrusts manages to put some of his length into her mouth. Rey does try to suck a bit but it's hard to in this position.

"I want to taste you, Rey. Can I?"

She nodded and watches him crawl in between her legs. She was already wet and it sort of relaxes her because she has something to give him. She couldn't help to be make sounds. It's very difficult not to with his tongue swirling and licking up her sopping cunt. His tongue is warm and his facial hair is ticklish. He sucks from time to time and whenever he does it makes her moan a lot. He enjoys it though. He enjoys eating her out she knew by the way his eyes are shut and he keeps tugging on his cock. He presses his face really close to, his long nose being coated in her but he doesn't care. He keeps moaning and chanting her name as he sucked and ate her.

He really, really likes her.

And she really likes him sucking on her clit. She can't help but to buck her hips and roll herself along his large mouth.

He becomes silent for a moment and then pulled away from her sopping pussy. She blushed watching him disconnect from her there while there was a trail of liquid still connecting him. It's sort of white. Liquid strings. "You came so much sweetheart," he said gathering the leftover come with fingers. He sucked his fingers clean in front of her as he rubbed his teased cock to some sort of relief.

"I did?"

She didn't know she was. She doesn't know much about the human body really.

He nodded and smiled. He ran his finger along her cunt and sucked his finger again. "I'm surprised I didn't come myself. You tasted so good." He wiped his face with the back of his hand.

His beard was still moist but she doesn't say anything.

"Rey, I really, really need to finish sweetheart. Can I?"

"Okay," she raised her eyebrow.

He laughed.

"What?"

"You're so cute."

He sort of grabs her then, grabs her closer. "It's going to hurt. Tell me when to stop."

She nodded, closing her eyes as she felt his tip rubbing against her folds. They are both really wet and like it. Her heart skipped a beat as she felt him press into her, breaking into her. Fuck. She shut her eyes. It hurts. It's pressure but it feels like a sharp pain. She sank her nails into his back as he got closer to her to a point they were chest to chest.

Pubic bone to pubic bone.

He's there. Completely. He's really large. The pain's unbearable but she feels something. She feels whole. Like he's supposed to be there.

She clenched her teeth as he moved slowly. "I'm sorry," he touched her cheek. He grabbed her hand.

She takes it and squeezes for life. It really hurts but she doesn't want him to stop.

He keeps moving but he kisses her softly.

It hurts but slowly it doesn't. The pressure is still there but it's not as bad to when he first went in.

"You're so small," he rasped.

"Do you like that?"

"Yes."

She can barely move. She feels like she's being torn apart but if he pulls out she's rip completely. So she lets him stay inside. She lets him thrust and hump into her. It feels like she's being taken by an animal, a very starving animal. But it was okay because she was starving too.

He's devouring her.

The bed was shaking. But no one can hear. The basement was soundproof.

He's consuming her.

She finds out that kissing him eases the pain. So she keeps kissing him as she gripped onto his back.

You don't forget your first time. And certainly you don't forget your first time with your husband. Their first time together was years ago but she still remembers the feeling and shock of hot liquid being released into her — spilling into her. In ribbons almost. Hot streams of ribbons. Or the way he became still as he did so — his whole body frozen except for one part of his body that was pumping into her.

He came a lot, a lot ended up overflowing to her thighs and to the sheets.

Rey remembers it, being completely startled and confused to the warm sensation.

She didn't know what to think of it but then she was coaxed by the aftermath — seeing him exhausted and breathing heavily. He ended falling asleep on her. She could have tried to escape but she didn't. She stared at him for a few minutes before falling asleep as well.

Out of all the things she's done, she doesn't regret going back to him. Because if she didn't, she didn't know where she would be or how long she would have make it. She wouldn't have Benny.

Every mom has a certain thing about them, a thing that helps you spot her in a crowd.

Some kids can find their moms by the smell of their perfume.

But for Benny, he can spot his mom by her bracelet. You see, Mom has this bracelet. It's a crystal bracelet with little charms. And she wears it every single day, on her right wrist. Always.

The earliest memory Benny has was when he was three or so and was fascinated by how shiny it was.

It was a pretty bracelet but nothing compared to how pretty Mom is.

Dad always says that she's the prettiest woman there is and Benny believes it.

Until he was like ten or so, whenever he was sad or scared Mom would hold him until he stopped crying. He used to bury his head into Mom's chest or lie on her lap and play with her bracelet. He used to touch the charms and feel the texture. Mom wouldn't mind until he accidentally tugged too hard. Which always happened. It was inevitable, Benny always forgets how light Mom is.

But today is one of the exceptions.

Mom is holding him and letting him cry. His head is on Mom's lap and he's on his side. Benny knows he's old now but Mom doesn't care. Mr. Romano, Benny's science teacher, just passed away. Or actually, he passed away a few days ago but the school wanted to wait until after Christmas to release an email about it. Mr. Romano was a cool teacher. Every kid liked him. He's like sixty or so — or was. He was driving up north to visit his family. He stopped at a gas station and got shot by a random stranger.

The email didn't say that, it just sugar coated it and glossed it all over. Benny and his friends only found out the real truth through the news.

Mr. Romano is Benny's favorite teacher and it makes him sad that someone can do such a thing, especially to an innocent person.

His friends thinks it's weird that Benny's this depressed about Mr. Romano's death. But the thing is, Benny hadn't dealt with death before. All his friends have though, they at least lost one close figure in their life.

Sure Benny only had Mr. Romano for a few months but the thing is the tragedy was over somebody Benny knew.

It's surreal to think that Mr. Romano's not here anymore. It's hard to think that after winter break, the classroom will be there but him. It's frightening to think that life goes on still but not completely.

Mom holds him tight and rubbed his back. "It's okay Benny."

Benny moved his head.

Mom gets the hint and stroked his hair.

He likes it when Mom strokes his hair. It made him feel safe.

Benny can't help but to run his fingers along her bracelet. It's instinct almost for him to do so. It relaxed him, to feel the cool material against Mom's soft skin. But then he felt something odd.

Her wrist bone, it felt odd. Like disjointed. Wobbly He doesn't know the word or the correct terms to describe it, it just didn't feel the same as her other wrist or his wrists. Has her wrist always been like that? And that he just didn't notice?

He lifted his head.

"Benny what's wrong?"

"It's nothing — it's just your wrist bone feels — off." He doesn't know the words for it. "Why is that?"

"It's nothing," she smiled, chuckling. "I broke my wrist years ago."

"Does it hurt still?" he asked, suddenly remembering the years of him tugging on her bracelet and making Mom wince.

"From time to time."

“But your wrist should be healed though.”

“My wrist wasn’t properly healed,” she said as she nudged him to lay on her lap again. “It’s nothing really.”

During the remainder of the break, Rey contacted the members of the PTA and they all got together to speak with the principal about the aftermath of Mr. Romano’s death. Besides the school planning an assembly and a memorial, the main concern was making sure there was a support system and counseling. Another concern which was the elephant of the room, was finding a replacement teacher in such a short time.

It felt very horrible and disrespectful but the thing is, the seventh grade students still need a science teacher. There was already another seventh grade science teacher but that teacher was already booked with also teaching eighth grade science. And there’s a limit of students allowed in a room/class policy.

The only thing was finding a new teacher.

The school promises that they will find a teacher as soon as possible.

But the break ends too soon.

And the kids have had eight different substitute teachers in the last two weeks.

They’re learning nothing. It’s mostly busy work. This makes her upset because the school should get substitute teachers that know the subject but she also knows that’s very difficult to find especially with short notice. So for the last two weeks Benny says that the period has been turned into a free period. It’s not that bad at least. At least the kids are doing something. But Rey knows damn well that most kids aren’t using it to study but to gab and goof around.

But some substitute teachers do try to teach. But it’s kind of hard to teach and pick right off when there are no lesson plans.

Rey understands how hard it is to try to carry on.

“Sweetheart, relax. Things will work out eventually,” Ben said as he helped her dust some powdered sugar onto lemon squares.

“I know — it’s just it feels so disrespectful to Mr. Romano,” she said as she pulled out another batch of lemon squares from the oven. She was making them for the community center.

“Rey, the kids need a teacher. And Mr. Romano would understand.”

She bit her lip. “I know.”

“Hey Rey, I think you got a message.”

Rey set aside the batch of lemon squares and took off her oven mitts. She picked up her phone and found an email, an email from school.

“What is it?” Ben asked.

“The principal announced that he found a teacher who’s more than qualified,” Rey sighed in relief. “And that the teacher will start next Monday.”

“That’s great,” Ben smiled, pressing a kiss on her cheek.

Rey scrunched her nose and smiled. She continued reading the email and paused. Mr. Dameron. Dameron. Why does that name sound familiar?

4. Ben and Benny

Ben lets his wife go out on her own.

Within the vicinity.

But he loves his wife. He wants nothing but for her to be safe.

That's why her phone has a tracker.

Because she is very fragile.

He waits for her sometimes when she goes out on his day off. He waits. Like a dog waiting for his owner.

Sometimes he follows her. To make sure she's with the people she said she'll be. His wife is a good girl but sometimes, he wants to make sure. It may be silly for him to still… linger around her after all these years but he can't help it. He likes watching her when she's in her own little world.

Ben doesn't mind that she's around men from time to time. Because she's a good girl. She's loyal and she knows better. She knows that she is his wife. And she loves him. He was her first time. The only one. They have a beautiful child together.

He doesn't get jealous. Whenever someone comments on how beautiful his wife is, he is proud. Because she is.

Ben doesn't get jealous but he does get worried from time to time. Whenever he does feel worried she reminds him how much he has her — how much she is his. She goes on her knees and sucks him off. She'll let him paint her nails too. She doesn't like it but he does. He likes grooming her — he still brushes her hair every single night.

It's not like he doesn't let her go anywhere — whenever she wants to go somewhere nice he takes them — him, her, and Benny. They go to

different cities and states. And he doesn't mind if she goes anywhere if she brings Benny with her because Benny always brings her back home.

She's asking about going out on a girls' trip with Phas and Rose — it's just. Just she's never been out on her own for more than a day. She always comes back before the day ends.

"I won't be gone for too long —

"How long?" he asked as he took a bite of his food. They were eating dinner and Benny was still in the room. So Ben does his best to be calm.

Rey pushed around the grilled vegetables on her plate. "Five days — not even a week," she explained.

"I don't think Benny would want you to be away from him that long," Ben said reasonably.

Benny looked up in bewilderment. "I won't mind. I think it'll be nice for mom to go out and have fun," Benny said nonchalantly as he took a sip of his water.

Ben frowned but shifted his gaze at his wife.

Rey shifted slightly in her seat.

"It's okay if mom goes," Benny said. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

Ben's jaw twitched. He cleared his throat though and took another bite of the steak. "Where do you and the girls plan to go?" he asked in a tone that Rey knew so well. It was the we'll talk about this later when Benny's not around tone.

She hasn't wondered off in years — but it was still good to be safe.

Ben has been away from her before. Days at a time too. Twice a year, he has to go out of state for a week for work. He's been away from her but it's not much of an issue because Benny is there. Benny's life is here. Benny's friends are here.

There was a time, long ago that he kept her locked up when he went away for work. He couldn't bring her and she was still… relentless. He had to lock her up in the basement.

It wasn't bad or anything — the basement had a bathroom, and he stocked up a week and half's worth of food in the little fridge. And there was a microwave and books and he even brought down the TV for her. And he stocked up on all types of vitamins and cold and flu medicine and aspirin. And bought a big case of bottled water.

Except she was pregnant during that time and they didn't know it yet.

The second (or third?) time he locked her up, Benny was a baby then. Ben to this day regretted for locking up his baby.

He remembers rushing to home a week after being away and finding his wife holding their baby on the floor. They were fine — Rey was reading Benny a book — but the sight wasn't something Ben wanted to see. It was an image, an illusion that he was some monster keeping the woman he loved and their child prisoners.

Something could have happened to Benny while Ben was gone. Something bad and Rey would be unable to get them out since they were locked in.

Nothing happened to Benny but that was the last time he did that to his wife and son.

He remembers it, rushing to lift them both in his arms. They were that small. He held them for hours and apologized a million times.

"I'm sorry," he whispered into her shoulder as he held her and their son in his arms.

"It's alright," she tells him, attempting to brush him off.

Ben shook his head. "No. It's not. Something could have happened and you wouldn't be able to do anything."

She became quiet at the thought. “Benny… Benny is fine,” she said, examining their son. She couldn’t help but to be in disbelief.

He ended up holding them for hours. He didn’t want to let them go. That night years ago, he even bathed them together — with him in the tub as well. It’s one of his favorite memories — to be close to them — to kiss his wife lovingly as she cleaned their son. To kiss her slick hair that clung to her neck. To kiss her cheeks. To kiss her back. It was intimate. It was innocent. She let him too and that was when he realized she missed him too. That her looking at him with those glassy eyes when he came back wasn’t of fear but of relief.

“I love you,” he tells her as he rubbed her back. They were still in the tub, slicked and all.

She froze up for a bit but then moved slightly. “I still have some milk,” she said then. “If you want,” her cheeks went red. That was her way in telling him she cares. Because she saves her milk for him at the end of the day. Throughout the day she pumps the excess and freezes it but near the night she keeps it in her breasts for him. Because she knows that he likes sucking her.

“We should get out of the tub first,” he tells her.

Him and her they’re in towels. Just towels. They were putting on clothes on their was no need for them to put on clothes because once the baby was asleep he was going to make love to her.

Ben takes no time to kiss her the second she puts their baby in the crib.

“I need to brush my hair —

He shook his head. “I don’t care,” he said as he tugged off their towels.

There was no need for them to go to a different room because their baby was asleep in the crib and their bed was in the same room. Their baby was still young, they’ll stop once their baby wakes up during it.

She likes feeding them both, Ben knows. She likes feeding them — her son and her husband because for once, she has something to give. Ben doesn't drink that much though — only once a night. He likes the taste and all but he loves the act of sucking the milk out of her fatty nipples. He likes touching her plump breasts and groping them. He likes squeezing the milk into his mouth and watching the milk come out in a leaky stream.

She touches his hair when he drinks from her. He loves it when she does. She touches him in astonishment. And Ben knows why. He reminds her of their son. It's no surprise since their baby is a carbon copy.

It's nice for it's a moment of fondness from her.

He sucks her dry for he's been away. He keeps sucking though. He's not ready to let go.

"I'm sorry it's not a lot. I've been pumping more since you were gone."

"It's fine. I didn't want your breasts to be sore while I was away," he kept sucking. One by one. Back and forth. He misses this, the act of latching on to her close. He's grown accustomed to it since there was a period of time he couldn't have sex with her due to her body healing from giving birth.

She's empty but she doesn't mind.

He knows because she's not wincing or tightening her grip on his hair.

She's just stroking him, watching him.

He doesn't stop until she does. His eyes flickered up at her in confusion.

"I feel bad. I don't —

"You have so much to give to me," he reminded her, touching her cheek. "You give me everything. Every inch of your body." He touched

her then, letting his hands graze upon her. "You give me pleasure. You gave me a child. You give me comfort. You give me love."

He made her smile the most the morning after that night. He took out the locks of the basement and painted over the tally marks and put pretty wallpaper. He didn't say much and she didn't ask but they both knew that it was the last time she or Benny would be locked up in a basement.

The thing is, no matter what he does it'll never erase those memories she has. Her wrist is a constant reminder of it. A reminder how he failed and refused to take her to get medical care after he broke her wrist. He would have but she didn't see his good intentions. And because of that her wrist never healed properly even with him looking up tutorials. Her wrist pops out. Her wrist is very sensitive. If she injured herself there again it could be permanent damage (he thinks).

The only thing he can do is make up for them. She is a good girl. She still goes in their bed for him even after he gave her that tone during dinner.

"You can go," he tells her gently. He loves his girl.

"What? Really?"

He nodded slowly. He exhaled as she smiled in delight. "Promise me you'll call me and send me pictures from time to time."

"I will!" she hugged him. "Thank you! Ben this means so much to me —

She stopped the second she sees his mood changing. He looks sad.

"You don't have anything to worry about," she said, touching his face. She lifted his face up to her. "I'll come back. I always do."

"Why?" he asked. He knows the answer but he likes hearing it.

Rey scrunched up her nose and giggled. "Because I love you."

It makes him warm all around. He couldn't help but to be giddy.

She kisses his nose. "You're silly Big Benny," she said, her lashes hitting her cheeks.

Dad's not the same when Mom is gone. When Mom is gone, it's like a piece of him is missing.

When he's not working, he's just quiet. He sits on the couch and thinks to himself. Sometimes he puts on the TV. Sometimes. Sometimes Dad drinks beer — but he never gets drunk or anything. He just drinks. He doesn't drink the pain away like Joss' mom. Dad just drinks. He's sober. He's still in a good mood and calm and doesn't forget to feed and check up on Benny.

Dad gets like this for as long as Benny can remember. Benny remembers being five and trying to cheer up his Dad by drawing him something and showing it. Dad pretended to be interested but five year old Benny saw right through it.

Dad only gets somewhat happy when he gets a text or call from Mom.

Sometimes Dad stares at the old conversations for hours when he's at home.

Benny decides to make dinner for him and his old man. His dad is at work but will be coming home soon. Benny makes spaghetti and meatballs because that's one of few things he knows how to make. From scratch too, he wanted to add. Now that he's in middle school he has to help around especially when one of his parents is away. He even makes a salad too. He's not good at cutting but it tastes the same despite it not looking as pretty the way Mom makes it.

When Benny is setting up the table, that is when Dad gets home. "Hey sport, what do you want for dinner?" Dad asks.

"I made dinner tonight," Benny said as he put meatballs strategically on the plates. Mom always make it look nice and so Benny has to do the

same.

“Really?” Dad said in disbelief.

Benny nodded.

“That’s great Benny but you didn’t have to —

“It’s alright. I’m old enough,” Benny reminded, brushing off the guilt off Dad’s face. “Besides it wasn’t much of a hassle. I’ve seen Mom cook a million times.” It wasn’t so bad except Benny overcooked the meatballs slightly just to be safe. “Besides I’m kind of tired of getting take out.” Dad knows how to cook and all but he saw no point in cooking when it’s just the two of them. It’s been only three days that Mom’s away and Benny’s already tired of Chinese food and pizza and wings and sandwiches from the local deli.

Dad gave him a small smile and petted his hair.

Dad is not the same when Mom is gone. But neither is Mom. When Dad is gone twice a year, Mom gets really sad. She would pretend she’s fine though but Benny knows. They both look after Benny well when the other is away but on their free time, they get funny.

When Mom is gone, Dad just sits on the couch and watches TV.

And when Dad’s gone, Mom lingers in the basement. It’s not weird or anything, there’s a couch for her to sit down there. And books too and board games. When Mom goes in the basement, she always takes Benny with her. Probably since he was a baby. It’s like another room. The earliest thing he can remember is when he was six and they were in the basement playing with his blocks. He was having fun until he tried to go up to get some more toys.

“Mommy,” Benny said as they went to his room.

“Yes, baby?” Mom said as she helped carry some toys back into the basement.

“Why do we play in the basement when Daddy’s away?”

“I— I, It’s our little secret club when Daddy’s away. It’s nice, no?”

“It is nice. But Daddy should be here too.”

“Daddy’s not here right now and he wouldn’t want us to be here when he’s away. So it’s our secret club. Just you and me. No one else.”

“I like that.”

It was just like any other room except Mom lets them eat there too. And sleep. They sort of live in the basement until Dad comes back.

It’s a nice basement with bright wallpaper and has a TV set too and his instruments.

Except Benny doesn’t like going there as much when Dad’s away. Benny is older and finds it a bit odd now that Mom sort of lives there. He’s more content being in his room since he was ten years old but Mom doesn’t mind. She doesn’t take him there. But he does go inside the basement from time to time to check up on her. And sleep with her. Because he doesn’t like the idea of her sleeping on her own there.

He kind of regrets for saying Mom should go. Because he hates seeing Dad like this. But soon Mom will be back and things will be back to normal.

Joss thinks that Mr. Dameron is cute. All the girls do. Some boys too.

Benny can’t see it.

Mr. Dameron is old. Maybe a little older than Dad. Mr. Dameron has dark curly hair and a beard and dresses like a College professor. He’s nice though. And him and his friends like him too. (He and Joss have the same period together while Max and Greg have in a different period). Joss can’t help but to stare at Mr. Dameron all doll eyed.

Mr. Dameron is nice, he speaks in a soft raspy tone and always dresses warmly. He doesn’t make them take notes or anything. He leaves

it as a choice. He doesn't even write things on the board or have slides and so if you want to take notes you have to listen really good or read the book. It's really weird to Benny because every teacher he had writes things down. Mr. Dameron just lectures. Other teachers check up on notebooks and notes but Mr. Dameron doesn't. Mr. Dameron is very, very laid back.

Dad says that it's common for College professors to that.

It's just… very unconventional.

Mr. Dameron does put class participation as a part of grades. So that is something. Something conventional. He also takes account to tests and labs. But that's a bit weird because every day he has a lab or group activity. Benny's not a science person and so he dreads applying stuff to real life. At least he has Joss as a partner to help him out.

Mr. Dameron feels like a teacher though. He takes charge. He's been here for the last four days and it already feels like that it's his class. He's really… out there. Not crazy out there, just very free spirited.

He's very smart though. He knows his stuff. He doesn't even open the book when he lectures like Mr. Romano. Mr. Dameron knows science by heart.

"I don't really like Mr. Dameron," Benny admitted to his Dad over dinner.

Dad laughed. "Why?"

Benny shrugged. "I don't know. He's nice and all it's just he's very out there."

"How's the class?"

"I'm doing okay it's just his teaching style is very different."

"Well if you have trouble I can always help you with your homework."

“I haven’t gotten homework yet. I feel like that he’s the type to not give out homework.”

“That’ll be odd. Homework helps students remember the lessons.”

Benny sighed. “All my friends like him and I don’t want to be the only one that isn’t a fan of him.”

Ben patted his son’s hair. “It’ll all be okay. Whatever happens Mom and I will help you learn.”

“He’s so out there — he brings his droid every day to school.”

“A droid?”

Benny nodded. “BB-8 I think — that’s the name of his droid.”

“A droid? He brings a droid?”

“He made it himself. It’s fully functional. Moves on its own.”

“This guy sounds nuts,” Ben laughed.

How was your trip — is something that Ben doesn’t ask when she comes back.

It’s because he already knows from the days she had been away. He calls her every single night she’s been gone. Texts whenever there is a free moment.

He holds her. Kisses her. Before saying anything.

Caresses her cheek.

“Where’s Benny?” she asks before things get heated.

“He’s sleeping over at Greg’s house,” Ben said peppering a kiss then.

“I was hoping he’d be home when I got back —

“He’ll come back tomorrow — I just wanted some time.”

“Alone?”

He nodded, his eyes lowering. “Yeah,” he said softly.

“With me?” she asked, blushing.

He chuckled. “Of course,” his voice went softer. He scooped her up in his arms then, just like that.

She wrapped her arms around him and kisses him. Kisses him, kisses every sharp angle of his. She presses herself close just to feel the warmth of his breath.

She’s only been away for five days and yet it felt like she’s been gone for a long time.

She missed the PTA meeting and missed meeting Benny’s new teacher. But she will get the chance soon. The meetings were once a week.

Rey likes being involved with the school and anything Benny related from sports to clubs. She doesn’t mind baking two hundred cupcakes or driving around the team or helping fund her son’s clubs and setting up events. She likes being involved.

Ben helps out from time to time. But has work most of the hours.

Rey doesn’t mind because she likes some to herself and for Benny.

Benny’s getting so big now. He’s twelve but soon he’s going to be gone.

“How was Benny when I was away?” she asked as she folded the laundry. Benny was hanging out with his friends and it was just her and Ben.

“He was good as usual — he’s getting so big now. He cooked some meals on his own and vacuumed and even washed the dishes without me asking.”

“Really?”

“I guess he picked up a thing or two from watching you,” Ben laughed. He helped Rey by putting the folded laundry into the right drawers and compartments.

Benny’s not helpless it’s just Rey and Ben like taking care of him. Benny was their baby still.

“He’s growing up. I’ve been gone for only a couple of days but he seems taller,” she couldn’t help but sigh. “Or is that just me?”

“I can’t tell. Every time I see him I just see him as my baby boy.”

“He’s going to go through puberty soon and getting even bigger. And his voice won’t be the same.” She likes Benny’s soft high pitched voice.

Ben chuckled and rubbed his wife’s back. She’s dreading the day when Benny grows up. “I’ll be okay as long as he never cuts his curls.”

“Or strengthens it,” she jabbed at her husband. She’s seen pictures of her husband at her mother in law’s house. Pictures of Ben in black clothing and strengthened hair that covered half his face.

“Well if he does do it, it’s only natural. Kids that stage need to experiment in order to find themselves.”

“Ben,” she calls out for him.

“Yes?”

“Can we have another baby?”

He takes no time in jumping on her.

The baby looks like him. This is the first thought that enters her mind when she’s holding her newborn for the first time. Her baby was clean and bundled up with his sling properly secured underneath. She’s being extra careful, delicate with her son. Son — she has a son. She can barely

process it. She has a son now. The baby was asleep, peacefully sucking on his pacifier.

She stroked his cheek and held him closer to her chest. Her eyes flickered in amazement. The baby looks like him. Exactly. Almost identical except he has her nose. It's surreal. The baby looks like him but she doesn't feel anything negative towards him. No hatred. No resentment. No horror. Just… awe. He's just a baby. He didn't ask to be born. He didn't have a choice in his parents. He's just a little thing. He's so small, so fragile. He's adorable, she keeps thinking. Even though the baby looks like Ben, he's beautiful. Tiny little curls, pudgy cheeks, swollen face. Poor baby, he never asked for this and already went through so much. He never asked to be suffocated by the umbilical cord. He never asked to be given a fractured arm. The doctors had to act fast with the baby and accidentally hurt his arm.

It's amazing, that the baby looks like him and yet she finds her baby very beautiful. Her baby looks like the monster and yet she sees her baby as nothing but beautiful. Just beautiful.

She loves him, she loves her son. She feared for months that he would look like HIM and be traumatized. She feared for months that there was a possibility she could have post partum depression. There were so many things she was worried about but all those fears melted. Just like that. Her baby was more than HIM, her baby was also her. And that was the first time she had something of her own, someone of her own. She lifted her son and kissed him tenderly.

"Thank you," Ben whispered to her, pressing a kiss on her head. "I'm so proud of you, Rey."

She looked up and blinked. How can someone so sweet and pure come from him?

"Can I?" he asked gently.

Rey couldn't help but frown. "Will you… will you be careful?" she asked. She couldn't help but to be skeptical.

Ben chuckled. "Of course."

Before she can say anything, Ben takes the baby away. She watches intently as Ben held their son. "Hey little guy," he says, smiling brightly.

He touches their baby's arm.

"Be careful," Rey said sharply. "You broke my wrist." She doesn't forget that. "And the baby already has a sprained arm —

"I won't." No irritation. No animosity. Just fondness.

Ben's very gentle with the baby. There's a wide smile on his face. He looks almost harmless. "What should we name him?"

"Ben is fitting," she said slowly. She hated to name the baby after him. For months he insisted but Rey disagreed. She felt it was pompous but looking at their baby now — it made sense. Her — their baby looked like him.

"Are you sure?"

She stared at her baby and then at him and the way he was holding her baby. He loves the baby too — not as much as her but he loves the baby too. "Yes."

Benny was conceived from a moment of weakness from her. The monster struck a cord with her that night. Called her nothing. And she was very vulnerable. And he knew. He got underneath her skin. And he showed her a bit of affection, a bit of weakness too. She… didn't know what happened.

It just did.

But it didn't mean that she loved Ben.

No. During her pregnancy she resented him and was reminded that she was being manipulated and kept prisoner.

But, when he's holding her son, he doesn't look like a monster. He doesn't. He looks loving. A mirror of her son. Like a loving father.

And that puzzles her.

That he's involved. She expected to be taking care of the baby while Ben just uses her for his pleasure. But he's very involved. He changes the baby's diapers, cleans her breast pump, and helps sanitize things. He helps her even at nights.

Ben plays music. He plays guitar or bass to the baby. Sometimes while he's holding the baby too. He plays calming music. Music that the baby and she likes.

"I didn't know you played," she commented. When he holds the baby, she follows him. She gets very defensive when Ben's around the baby even though Ben hasn't done anything to their baby — yet.

He looked up and gave her a lopsided smile. He's playing the guitar right now with the baby in his arm. Ben's so big that he's able to hold the baby securely and play with both hands. He sees it, her interest in him. "There's a lot of things you don't know about me," he chuckled. He looked down and cooed at their son.

"Like what?" she asked like a skeptical child. Her eyebrows are furrowed.

"For one thing, I was this small as a baby," he chuckled faintly.

"Really?" It was hard to imagine that a giant like him was ever that small.

He laughed. "Yeah. That means one day baby's going to be big as me. Maybe even taller."

She frowned. She doesn't like that — that one day baby won't be a baby anymore. "You're super tall as it is. How tall are you?"

"Six foot three."

"Maybe baby will be in between our heights," she said.

“Maybe. It’s still too early to know.” Ben put down his guitar and held the baby to him with both arms. “Maybe you’ll be big as daddy, huh little guy?” he asked slowly moving the baby’s good arm. He chuckled and kissed the baby.

“What are the other things?” she mumbled.

“What things?” he looked up.

She couldn’t help but to blush. It wasn’t that he was making her nervous — it’s just hard for her to talk — to him. “About you. Things that I don’t know about you.”

Rey misses it, misses being pregnant and having a baby around the house.

She misses it, feeling little feet kick her in her belly. She misses holding a little bundle of joy in her arms and watching the baby grow and change. Benny is still a baby in her eyes, but she knows he’s going to be an adult before she knew it.

It’s weird to admit, but she and Ben used to have sex while Benny was in the same room. It wasn’t that *weird,* Benny was still a baby and they would do it when he’s fast asleep in his crib. It would go like this, she would breastfeed Benny. Once Benny was done and asleep, she would put him in his crib and come back to bed and let her husband suck the remaining milk in her breasts. After he emptied them he would go in between her legs and eat her out. She loved when Ben did that. She loved him eating her — devouring her — greedily taking whatever her body produced. She loved it the most when her husband sucked her nipples and drank her milk. It was bonding, an intimate bonding. After he gets her to come at least twice from his mouth, he fucks her, fucks her in the bed. Rey would try her best to be quiet in fear of waking up her baby but her husband always get her to moan. It was hard not to, he felt so good in her and kisses her all up. She would keep her eyes focused on the crib

during all of this — to make sure nothing happened to her baby. Benny never woke up though but she kept looking because it was comforting.

But also it was sweet. (It's weird that she feels this way but she can't help it). It was comforting as her husband fucked her for Rey to stare at her sleeping baby and be reminded that what happened to her made something beautiful. And the man that took her was not completely bad for her son was half of him and her son was perfect. Precious.

Ben doesn't mind that Rey watches their baby while he fucked her. In fact, he loves it. It's not like she gets off on it, she's just being nurturing. He loves her being attentive to their son — he loves that she loves their son. He spent nine months being afraid that she would hate their child and be repulsed but she wasn't. Even though Benny looked completely like him, she still adored their baby.

Whenever he wanted to enter into her, he doesn't go in automatically. He doesn't want to startle her and so before he does so, he would rub his tip along her slick as a light notification. Her eyes would be locked on to their baby still but the second he hear her moan and nod, he slips himself inside of her warmth. She agrees so easily with him, even with their first time together.

"You made a beautiful baby," Ben will always say when he's almost ready to come. His voice is always filled with gratitude when he tells her, with admiration.

She always look up and stare at him when he says that. Her cheeks always became flushed at the sight of his soft smile. In response, she will tell him, "No. We both did." Always. And she meant it.

He would smile and stroke her hair and cheek. "Do you regret me being your first time?" he would always ask in response.

"No," she would say. Every time he asked her, she became less and less hesitant. To a point that she's not.

And that's when he kisses her.

And it went like clock work. Routine. Every single day, they would do this until Benny was about nine months old and woke up one evening. It was funny because the first time Benny stood up was in his crib while she and Ben were in the middle of having sex. It makes Rey chuckle to remember seeing her baby stand up for the first time. Benny was waving and smiling at them, unaware what was happening but he was just happy to see his parents. (She and Ben were completely naked and in doggy position, she remembers clearly when her son first stood up.) Benny didn't know what was happening but found it funny and giggled, trying to get his parents' attention. Naturally they stopped doing that the second after and broke out in embarrassed chuckles as their baby smiled at them in glee and innocence. After that day, they had sex in the other room and kept a monitor nearby.

They miss having a baby around.

And that's why they're sort of… kind of… over doing it. They usually have sex once or twice a week since Benny got older but now that they're trying to have a baby, they're back to every single day.

It's different now. They want a baby and she loves him. And that means a lot to Ben because she willingly wants another child with him — *from* him. He wanted to have another child with her since Benny was three years old but he never said anything. The truth is, her loving their son was a miracle. Their son brought them together, was the glue. Their son was an exception and Ben wasn't sure that she wanted another one.

But now he can't get his hands off of her.

It takes forever for Rey to get her husband off of her. She wanted the moment to last but she had to go the PTA meeting. She's all bundled up in pants and a sweater but her legs are wobbly and she can feel his come dripping from her still. Rey doesn't mind. She likes the feeling of his come. It's warm and gooey.

Benny's at the movies with his friends and Ben has to get ready for a business meeting that was an hour from now.

She kind of wished she was at home so she could help Ben get ready but she needs to go to this meeting. She really wanted to meet Benny's new teacher. But it's going to be a while. This meeting parents are discussing their concerns. Some are actually real concerns but most are complaints.

Rey did her best to sit in her chair instead of slouching.

She's not interested in this. She wants to meet Benny's new teacher.

She sees him though — he's sitting on the opposite end of her. She can tell it's Benny's new teacher because she doesn't recognize him. He has dark hair and dark eyes to a point it's almost black. He looks bored, she can tell by the way he was slouched and the way he kept playing with his scarf.

Rey knows little about Benny's new teacher besides that Benny doesn't really like him. Hopefully this new teacher is a decent teacher and Benny's feelings are just from difficulty to adjust and not something else.

This meeting is unbearable. Or feels more unbearable that usual. She's very impatient and during it she decided to google Poe Dameron. His name sounded very familiar to her from the start. And she wanted to know why. After a few clicks she found out that he is pretty well known in his field and for building droids. Most likely she heard of his name from news articles. It's probably one of those things — like you know certain things from the media like for some reason she knows some of the names of reality TV stars even though she doesn't watch those shows.

The second the principal called for a ten minute break, she makes a beeline for him.

"Hi," she said, introducing herself. "You're Mr. Dameron, is that correct?"

Mr. Dameron nodded as he held out his hand to her. “Yes I am — and you are?”

“I’m Benny Solo’s mom.”

“Please to meet you,” he gave her a warm smile. “Your son is a very sweet kid.”

Rey couldn’t help but to beam in pride. “How do you like teaching here?” she asked.

“I like it. It’s my first time teaching at a public school.”

“Really?” The email didn’t mention that.

“Yeah,” he chuckled. “It’s fine though. It’ll just take a little more to adjust with a different system — I’m sorry for asking but have we met before?”

She blinked.

“You look really familiar — of someone that I used to know.” He tilted his head slightly and blinked.

Rey shrugged. “I don’t think we have met before.”

He shook his head, pulling himself from staring. “You can call me Poe,” he held out his hand again.

Rey shook his hand. “Nice to meet you Poe.”

“And you are?”

“Mrs. Solo.”

5. Valentine's Day

Mom and Dad had him before they got married.

But it's not a secret though.

There's pictures all around of their wedding and Benny's in some of them. He's about one or so, he thinks. As a kid he didn't think much of it, he just admired how pretty and loving mom looks in the pictures. Mom, all dressed in white — in a timeless looking dress. She's dressed in a long sleeved white dress that hits at her calves and it's silk or something. There's a small keyhole to show a bit of her skin. Her hair is sleek down and slightly colored honey brown at the ends. And she's wearing red lipstick too.

Mom is one of those moms that doesn't wear lipstick. She doesn't wear perfume either. Or does much to her hair.

But when she does though, you can't help but to stop and stare.

Benny found himself stopping frequently to stare at those photos growing up. He remembers clearly being like four or so and stopping by to look at them while eating his favorite snack. It made him smile seeing the captured moment of Mommy holding him when he was a baby and Daddy cooing. Dad looked nice too, he wore a black suit. Dad's always the same in all the pictures but Mom always looked a bit different.

It didn't occur to him that most parents get married first. It didn't occur to him that it was looked down if you didn't. He didn't find out until he was like nine or so. It was at Greg's annual summer pool party and he overheard some moms talking bad about Mom. Hell, he didn't put two and two together that his parents did have him first. So many things go over your head as a kid.

But it's not a big deal to him though. He doesn't care that people judge Mom. Mom is the best person there is. And he sure hell did tell

those hateful moms off. Adults were so phony, they act all nice until the person leaves. Mom that day wasn't able to go because Dad was sick. It's even funnier that adults think that kids can't play and listen at the same time. He never yelled at adults before until that day.

Benny to this day has never told his parents about it. He doesn't want to make Mom sad. Because when Mom's sad, Dad gets very upset. And let's just say that Benny gets his temper from Dad. Besides, he sees no need to because no matter what, people are going to talk. That's the thing about a small town. Everybody knows everybody's business.

Valentine's Day was when they had their first kiss together.

They've kissed before but it was… circumstantial. Rey only kissed him willingly when she wanted something (which was never selfish but for their son). Like her asking for a Christmas tree. Or her asking for professional photos of their baby.

They didn't really have a first kiss until their first Valentine's Day with Benny. Benny was about five months old.

She was given a credit card some time ago. But she doesn't use it as much. She does buy things but she doesn't really count buying essentials like groceries and things for the baby as excessive use. She was told that she could get anything she wanted but there was something off putting about it. She doesn't want to be careless with money. She doesn't want to ever forget those years on her own.

But she makes her first purchase. Her first non-necessity purchase.

But it's not for her — it's for him.

It's their first Valentine's Day together and she wanted to make it nice for him. Ben has been for the last five months has been well… sort of great. He loves Benny. Absolutely adores him. And he gives her anything that she asks. Like the Christmas tree. Like New Year's. New Year's Eve

she asked for him to request the whole day off to be with her and Benny and he did. He even changed the basement.

Rey wants to make it up to him. She got lingerie that she knew he'll like. It's lacy and sheer and white with little pink ribbons on the straps. It was strange buying something like this — she's never bought lingerie before. It was pricey too and she couldn't help but to blush throughout the whole process of walking into the boutique and purchasing it with Benny in the stroller. Besides being painfully embarrassed she was worried that the cashier would be concerned that a teenaged girl was buying such a thing. But the cashier was unfazed by the whole ordeal.

Maybe it's because it's almost going to be Valentine's Day? Or maybe she looked older?

Rey didn't know but she was thankful that the cashier didn't say anything.

Ben will like it.

And that's what mattered.

She makes sure to think everything through before night came, before Ben came home from work. She had his mother watch Benny tonight and even put on some makeup and curled her hair.

She doesn't get into the lingerie. It seemed rather silly for her to be in it when he's not around. And so she's in her normal clothes making dinner for the both of them. Rey's not as a good cook like Ben but it's better for her to practice. It's not as bad — she has recipe books (books that she bought on his credit card — but it's for a good reason and not out of waste). (She can use the books for future meals).

She makes everything into the shape of a heart.

Is that too silly?

God she was so nervous. She just wants everything to be perfect.

But things don't go right. The steak is burnt and dry and like cardboard. The heart shaped ravioli is over cooked and doesn't look like hearts. And the cookies are on the floor.

Rey doesn't even have time to sigh. He would be home soon and so she immediately cleaned up the mess. It was better to hide her failed attempt than to show him on how inadequate she is as a human being. She can't provide for herself or him and the only thing she was good for was taking care of his son.

It's his son, she feels. And that she was just the vessel.

He doesn't look at her longingly anymore. He doesn't look at her the same way as he once did. He doesn't beg for her like he once did. He stopped getting her things some time ago.

That's why she likes asking things from him. Because he'll do it for her. He'll put in the effort. Like Christmas. She cherishes the memory. How he took her and Benny to the snow. And how he brought some mistletoe to kiss her.

Rey likes moments of normalcy.

Because during those moments it feels reel. That he met her in their favorite coffee shop. And he finally mustered a word to her. And the rest was history.

But those moments don't last.

And they were not normal.

Maybe she started developing some feelings for him (not romantic feelings — feelings of rejection from him) on the day he introduced her to his parents.

Rey was five months pregnant and Ben decided it was time.

She knows little to nothing about his parents. He talks about them from time to time but it's not much. His father only cares about himself and cheap thrills. His mother has lost a part of herself.

That's all she knows.

Nervous, that's what he is right now. He keeps hovering by the mirror, fixing his hair and her. He wants to give them a good impression. He even got her a new outfit and insisted for her to put on some makeup. Rey decided to go along with it and to fight a better battle. He got her a nice dress. It was a presentable and semi casual dress. She was showing now and not even the loose fabric could hide it.

"Did you tell them about me?" she asked, standing lifelessly as he fixed the collar of her dress.

"Yes."

"When?"

He paused and tried to recollect. "Last month."

She blinked. That was a long time — and they were going now? Maybe they hated her and that's why Ben didn't want to bring her right away. Involuntarily, Rey began chewing at her nails.

"Stop that," he said, pulling her hand away to maintain the glossy sheen. He had her nails done and painted at a salon and her hair too.

"Sorry," she said, frowning. Why… why was she nervous? It's not like she wanted approval. Let alone the baby. Or him.

His mother used to be very beautiful, Rey found out through the few family photos in the house. His mom is still beautiful but she's been worn and aged by life. There's stress lines laced around her face and her skin is close to leather. The life in her is deteriorating but some is still there. But in her youth the fire in her was scorching hot. His mother now is not

as slim as she used to be but it's expected at that age. His mother went through a lot pain and heartbreak over the years.

Rey can see it. She can see it from the white in his mother's hair.

His father used to be very handsome too but his wild ways aged him. His hair is near all white and his body looks thin and brittle. She senses bitterness in the man.

They don't look very happy.

They're not speaking but just being in the same room together was making them miserable.

For once Rey is thankful that Ben's arm is around her.

The only moment the two looked genuinely happy was when they saw Ben. They spent five minutes hugging him. But once they were done they were staring at her in dead silence.

His mother paints a smile on her face though. It looks artificial like the way she did with her hair. Rey couldn't help but to wonder if his mother did her hair herself or got it done at a salon. "Nice to finally see you face to face, Rey," his mother greeted her. Her voice is raspy from all the years of smoking.

Rey smiled back. "It's nice to meet you too —

"Mrs. Organa," his mother corrected.

Rey nodded. She tensed up as she felt their eyes crept on to her belly.

Ben's mother tries to go along with small talk but his father interrupts it. "How far along are you?" his dad asked. Bluntly. To the point.

Mrs. Organa let out a small sigh of relief.

Rey blinked. She looked up at Ben. Ben bit his lip.

"She's five months," Ben spoke out for her.

"Do you know if it's a boy or a girl?" his dad asked then.

“Boy.”

Rey watches his parents’ shoulders relax.

“Well she’s not as big for five months,” his dad let out a chuckle. “You guys can still have a wedding. She can wear your grandmother’s dress. It has a lot of folds and fabric.”

Wedding?

“I already told you that we’re not going to have a wedding,” Ben said calmly.

+ “That’s fine dear,” his mother said then. “You don’t have to have a wedding. There’s nothing wrong with getting married at the courthouse —

“We’re not going to get married.”

His parents winced as if their son had stabbed them.

“Why not?” Han asked Rey. His eyebrows were furrowed. “You don’t want to marry my son? What? Is he not good enough or something?”

“I —

“It’s not that, Dad,” Ben said without any emotion. “We just feel no need to be married. That it’s just paper. Our son’s still going to have a mother and a father.”

“You guys don’t love each other?” Leia blinked.

“We love each other,” Ben clarified calmly. “We are exclusive.”

Leia raised her eyebrow. “But not enough to be together?”

“It’ll be okay mom, we don’t need paper.”

Ben really shouldn’t have said that. They started fighting not him and his parents — his parents were fighting — blaming each other for a failed marriage and affecting their son’s view on love. And Ben just stood there in silence guiltily. Rey was silent as well. But she wasn’t

watching them. She was watching him and the way he was j+ ust taking his parents fighting. Accepting it.

His parents scream. They throw things at one another. Break things.

That was the moment that she finally understood the way he was.

She's cleaning up the failed Valentine's Day dinner with the memory of meeting his parents of the first time replaying in her mind. His parents were nice people but they weren't meant to be together. But at least they tried.

Ben initially wanted to marry her but somewhere down the line he changed his mind. It's most likely because of his parents. She couldn't help but to feel rejected though. He loves her and said he wanted to give their son everything — but he didn't want to marry her — but it shouldn't matter. She doesn't love him — she's forced into this — to be with him — to play pretend — to lie to his family and their neighbors — but their son — their son was real.

Rey couldn't help but to touch her bracelet for comfort.

He's not as bad as she once thought him to be. He's very lonely. Very quiet. He grew up watching his parents desperately trying to make things work over and over again until there was nothing.

He understands her. They are both very lonely people. They both crave for normalcy.

You don't forget your first Valentine's with your husband.

You don't.

You don't forget seeing him come home with roses and candy. You don't forget seeing his confusion that their son wasn't there.

“Where’s Benny?” he asked as he put the take out dinners on the table.

“He’s with your mother,” Rey said exhaling. She bit her lip. “I — I thought it would be nice — for us to just be… the two of us.”

She watches his eyes widen slightly. “That’s very nice of you.”

Rey kicked the small trashcan behind her, attempting to hide the evidence of a failed dinner.

But he doesn’t seem to notice — it wasn’t really on his mind.

She sees what’s on his mind, can tell by the way his eyes were becoming hooded. “Are you hungry?” she asked, shuffling her feet.

“Not really.”

She took a deep breath. “Do you… want to?”

“Want to what?”

She takes him by the hand. “Come here,” she said. She doesn’t want to say those words out loud.

Rey remembers how awkward it was.

Ben was very confused that night. In disbelief of what was happening.

She had to initiate everything.

And that’s something that Rey’s not very good at.

“I got a… dress,” she explained, her eyes staring at her feet.

“A dress? What kind of dress?”

She mumbled. “I’ll show you — is the door locked?” she blushed. Even though it’s just the two of them she wanted to make sure that no one else could walk in or see. She went to cover the window. First the blinds and then the curtains. And then another layer of sheeting. “You… should sit.” Rey went to pull out the dress from the paper bag. It was neatly folded.

“I was going to put it on but I wasn’t sure if you want to dress me.” He likes dressing and undressing her.

“I want to dress you — is that okay?” he was blushing too.

Rey blushed harder. Why… why is this so awkward? They’ve done it before.

Ben touches her cheek. And it makes her feel a tiny bit better. That he’s going to take control. And all she has to do is just go along.

He lifted up her arms and pulled the layers off. One by one, unrolling and tugging gently. Rey stayed still, allowing him to do so. She’s bare now but it’s not for long. She knows by the way his gaze is lingering across her body. His fingers are skimming along her flesh. And then — he puts the lingerie on her.

It’s short and shear. It barely covers her but he likes that. He likes seeing her entire body that’s being covered in a thin layer of lace. He likes seeing the thin fabric draping her, working along her curves. She knows this. She can see it by the way he was fascinated by the way her nipples were poking through and the thinness of the straps with the pretty pink ribbons.

He likes to stare at her.

But she doesn’t mind it anymore.

When he looks at her, he stops everything and he looks at her as if she was the only person in the world. He looks so much like Benny — has many mannerisms of Benny. She can’t really hate him.

“You’re beautiful,” he says in awe.

And that’s when she kisses him.

She can feel his happiness when he touches her. She couldn’t help but feel the same too. He’s so thrilled. Eager. He has her underneath him.

And he's moving so much. The bed is hitting the wall.

She usually senses his guilt and disgust with himself but she can't feel it right now.

Rey just feels how much he really, really likes her. She keeps kissing him.

"I love you," he says.

She couldn't help but hide her face into his arm. Rey can hear it, his moaning. She pulls away to kiss his cheeks.

He's smiling now, grinning. He's really happy. "This is how I wanted our first time to be sweetheart. I didn't want you to cry."

She cried?

She cried during their first time?

"No —

"Shh, it'll be okay sweetheart."

"Stop — stop —

Rey pulled away and recalled what happened after they had sex on their Valentine's together.

He gave her a ring.

"I didn't — I thought," she was tongue tied. Stunned. "I thought you didn't believe in marriage."

Ben chuckled as he slipped the ring on her finger. "I said I didn't believe in paper. You're my wife regardless of what a sheet of a paper says."

"You think of me as your wife?"

He laughed again. "You're my wife," he emphasized. "No matter what. If you want a wedding to make it feel real, we can."

“Has anyone see my baseball mitt?!” Benny hollered as he scrambled about in the house. “I have practice that’s in thirty minutes!” He was frantic. He always bought baseball mitts but kept losing them. They’re like the hair ties to Benny, Mom says — that no matter how many you buy, that you were meant to lose them.

“You have to start keep track, kid,” Dad chuckled as he followed his son.

Benny frowned. “I try! It’s just — I need to find it!” he dived down to search under his bed.

Dad yanks him out. “It’s gone in the Bermuda triangle, son. It’s okay, we’ll buy one on the way. I’ll drop you off too.”

Benny wrinkled his nose and smiled. “Thanks Dad.” He forgets how strong Dad is. That Dad can lift him with ease as if he weighed nothing.

“Get my keys while I lock the doors.”

Benny nodded and ran into Mom and Dad’s room. He made a beeline for the drawer and dug through for mess for the keys — there’s some photographs. Not some. A stack. Photographs that he’s never seen before.

Benny blinked.

They’re pictures of Mom except she looks very young. She must be a couple years older than Benny in the photos. He’s never seen pictures of her as a kid. He skimmed through a handful of pictures that he’s managed to put in his hand. They’re all strange — all the photos she’s not looking directly at the camera. All the photos she’s doing something and it looks natural. Not the fake staging, it looks like she’s unaware of being photographed. What’s that word? Candids. They were candids.

Most of the photos were her in the coffee shop.

Others of the photos were random — at the park, at the gas station, at the mall.

“Benny did you get the keys yet?”

“What are these? Was Mom doing some art project or something?” Benny asked. “I never seen these before.”

“I told you to never go through that drawer.”

Benny blinked. “I was looking for the keys —

“It’s always going to be the drawer on the left,” Ben reminded his son sternly.

“Sorry I was rushing — I wasn’t really thinking —

“It’s alright,” his Dad said as he took the photos from Benny’s hand. “Come on, let’s go. We don’t want you to be late,” his dad said as he put the photos away.

6. What Happened to Rey?

On the night that he took her, he wore all black.

Gloves and all.

He wore a mask.

“Why did you take me?”

It started as one picture.

Just one.

He wanted to remember how the lost girl looked like. She’s so afraid. And so quiet. She’s always moving. She lingers into different towns but keeps coming back here but he knew that soon she’ll find another place to feel safe.

But one picture wasn’t enough.

For he couldn’t capture her smiling. She rarely smiles but when she does it’s something beautiful. It warms him. He wanted to have that moment forever. Before she goes.

It’s not him that’s the reason that she’s thinking of moving. He keeps his distance. It’s her loneliness. It consumes her. Makes her tremble and shiver all through the night. And the only thing that she could do was to move, to keep herself busy from feeling the emptiness.

He knows her though, he knows that she’s not supposed to be like this. She was supposed to be bright and warm. He feels it in her, bubbling underneath the layer of protection.

He’s seen her be genuinely happy once.

It was raining and he was in the convenient store purchasing some things. He saw her through the glass, standing on the other side of the street. She caught his eye for she was familiar. She was the girl he started to see at the coffee shop for the last few months. He’s been going there for years and so she stood out. She was new.

He blinked as he reached for a pack of beer. She was just standing there in the rain. Her umbrella was still wrapped up but she didn’t mind that she was getting wet. In fact her hand was out, reaching for the rain drops to kiss her fingertips. She was happy. Beaming.

He blinked in awe at the sight.

If he could go back to that moment he would have taken a picture of her but he was frozen. Maybe if he could then all these feelings would never exist. Maybe if he did he would have left her be. Maybe if he did she would have been nothing to him but a stranger he saw on his route.

For that was the day he fell for her and wished he was the rain that made her smile.

He still keeps her in the basement even though she was pregnant.

She doesn’t even know she’s pregnant.

Ben doesn’t know how to tell her. He doesn’t know how she’ll take it. He doesn’t need tests. He knows. He’s been trying to hint it to her for the last few weeks. Poking at her morning sickness and loss of appetite.

But Rey responds and says it’s due to the lack of sunlight and fresh air.

He never goes beyond with this argument for that was partly true and maybe the reason that her morning sickness was so violent. She was

being restricted from basic necessities but he does provide her with a lot of supplements and alternative forms of iron.

He pokes at how she hasn't been using any feminine hygiene products in a while.

She responds and says that her period has always been irregular due to being so thin and that she's gone three months without a period before.

So carrying a baby will help her with her weight, he reminds himself.

"I'm fine," she tells him, swatting him away from hovering her. "I'm more than fine."

"Really?" he asks, going along with her obliviousness. Her innocence.

"I'm pretty fine circumstance wise," she said groaning as he traced the dark circles underneath her eyes. "I just want to be left alone."

"I don't want to leave you tonight," he tells her as his fingers grasped her cheekbones. He hopes their child has her cheekbones, her structure, every inch of her.

She lifted her dress then for him.

Is she bargaining for him to leave? For him to sleep with her in order to have some time alone? Or is she doing this because she's used to this now?

"I don't want to," he said as he tugged her dress down.

She blinked. "Really?"

She's used to rejection but not from him.

He shook his head. "I'm not in the mood."

"What do you want from me?" she asked defensively, tensing up.

She's panicking, he knew. She just wants to be wanted, that lonely girl.

“I should have never taken you,” he whispered, moving his hands from her.

“Why -why don’t you — let me go?” she asked, barely getting the words out.

You’re carrying my child, he wanted to say.

“Do you regret taking me? Or is it because you don’t want me anymore?”

Ben kissed her then. This time she’s not as reluctant. He kisses her some more. She kisses him back.

“I’m not broken,” she tells him. “I’ve been sickish lately but I’m not sick. I’m not broken,” she promises. “I know you’ve been looking at me differently but I’m not defective,” she heaves, tears running from her eyes as she tugged him to go on top of her. He keeps kissing her. “This is normal for me,” she vows, lifting her dress up.

Only monsters go on with hurting little girls.

“It’s not you — it’s me,” he tells her, watching her slowly lift up her dress. “I feel like I’ve done something to you — more than usual.” He’s a monster, he shouldn’t be enjoying the sight. His fingers run up her thighs without a thought. He should be shaken that she’s not being herself and not fighting him — that she’s not hitting or clawing him but he’s a monster. He likes her submitting to him.

She shook her head. “No you haven’t.”

I have. He wanted to say. He never used any protection with her in all the times he slept with her. And he never stopped himself from coming inside. He never gave her birth control or a plan b. And they have sex on an almost daily basis since her first time. He has scars to prove it — of all the times she resisted and fought him off but he overpowered her.

A good person would have stopped.

But he wasn’t a good person.

He was needy, just like her. And she needed a reminder how much he wanted her. And that's why half the times she goes along with him. Because of the emptiness in her and her need for it to be filled.

She's not the only one that's suffering.

He reminds himself as he stared at the sleeping girl.

If only he had spoken to her, things would have been different.

Or maybe it wouldn't. And he wouldn't see her ever again.

She's better here. Safer. Here he doesn't have to ever wear a mask ever again.

The next day after work instead of getting take out he went straight home. It was raining and she was locked up.

And she loved the rain.

When he inside the basement, she looked more frightened than usual. It's because he doesn't have food and a gift for her. She's sitting on the bed. Drawing. Or was. She was still now, staring blankly.

"It's raining," he tells her.

She blinked in disbelief. "Really? I didn't hear anything —

"The basement is soundproof," he reminded her, extending his hand out.

Rey raised her eyebrow.

"I know how much you love the rain," he tells her, pulling her up.

He keeps his distance from her.

He wants this moment to be hers.

He stood there underneath the roof while she was out there being kissed by the raindrops. And he sees it, the delight in her eyes. Her brightened smile. She was moving about, following the dancing water.

But all Ben could think about was taking her back to shelter from getting sick.

He restrains the urge to and allows her to have one moment on her own.

Twenty minutes passed but she's still out there. He says nothing. She's going to get sick but it's been a long time since he had seen her truly happy.

They stayed outside until it stopped.

And when it stopped —

So did she.

He watched her freeze in place.

Watched all the light slowly escape from her. She was completely soaked and dripping. There was water dripping down her cheeks. From the rain and from her tears.

Rey tried escaping once with Benny.

He was still a baby then.

And Ben was at work.

And that was when she decided to do it. She packed her things and latched Benny into the stroller and pacifier. She walked two miles with a backpack and two bags in the stroller to the nearest atm.

She would have taken the car but she didn't want to be tracked.

She took out all the money in the card.

Five hundred dollars.

And then she cut up the card.

And put the money in her bag. She had a credit card too but that was too risky.

She took him and her to a bus that lead to the subway. And she bought a ticket to the furthest place.

The subway wouldn't come for another thirty minutes. And so she fed Benny. To her surprise there was still a lot of time left. And so she changed him too.

She sat there, holding him close to her chest. "I don't mind you," she told him. "Not like I used to," she admitted in a low voice.

Rey had felt no attachment to Benny when he was in her belly.

It's heartless and cruel for a mother to feel.

But she was young.

She can still recall her horror as she felt her unnamed baby kick her. She still remembers those endless nights crying and experiencing nausea twenty four seven for a good majority of her pregnancy.

She did not want to have the baby — *his* baby. But he made her have it. She had no connection to the baby during the pregnancy at all. Rey was miserable. She was depressed. She was informed about the possibility of her having post partum depression by her doctor and was constantly monitored. She had no connection to the baby. She felt nothing. She didn't feel anger towards the baby. She felt indifferent to the thing inside of her and resentment towards the man that impregnated her. She didn't see the baby as a new life but an extension to *him.*

But that all changed when she saw Benny for the first time. Rey doesn't mean through the ultrasounds or anything, she means when she saw him physically. When he was born.

It was a different experience seeing the baby.

To see the baby crying. Moving. In pain. The baby even though he looked like Ben was completely his own person. She felt it — the new energy. She felt it. The baby was a new human. He didn't know anything. He needed someone. He needed her. He didn't ask to be born. He didn't ask for any of this.

Rey couldn't explain it — her sudden love for the baby. It was just there. Especially when she held Benny for the first time and felt how light he was — how fragile. Or how helpless he was. He could barely see. Could barely move. And how whenever he was hungry he would suck on her arm in search for milk.

He was cute. She couldn't help but to find him endearing when he yawned or hiccupped.

He was a rather calm baby. He didn't cry much. And she didn't mind when he did or when he peed on her. She didn't mind that she was in pain from birth for quite some time. She didn't mind that the baby was from her captor.

The baby was innocent.

He had no control in any of this.

And maybe that's why she loved him so much.

"I love you very much," she breathed as her eyes lowered at the baby. "It's just going to be us, okay?"

The baby didn't respond. He doesn't know what's going on.

She exhaled again.

She was about to put Benny in the stroller until a thought occurred to her.

Where would they go?

Where would they stay?

She didn’t have much money for an apartment. She had about seven hundred dollars on her. The other two hundred was from her old work. If it was just her, she didn’t mind sleeping in gas station bathrooms.

But it wasn’t just her.

She had a baby.

And the baby would get very sick.

And she would have to work — but who will watch the baby? She doesn’t have enough money for a sitter — and how about the baby’s things? Rey barely made it by on her own. There was no way she could support the baby on the streets.

The baby would need formula and diapers and more clothes — everything.

She clung to her baby as she trembled. There was no way she could take care of him on her own. She looked up at her surroundings and for once in a long time she felt lost. Everyone was a stranger.

She felt so small.

She had to go back. For the baby’s sake.

Rey put the baby in the stroller but she couldn’t remember how to get home.

She couldn’t recall the address.

Everything was getting blurry and she could barely breathe.

She reached for her bag and dug for her phone.

But she didn’t have her phone.

She left it at home.

Rey took a deep breath and dug for loose coins. She’ll just call him. He’s going to yell at her and punish her but she didn’t care. She just wanted him here.

She was having a panic attack, she knew.

She knows his number.

He had her sew his information in her bag for emergencies.

And so she called him.

God, her heart was beating so fast. There was no way she can go back on her own especially with the baby.

“Hello?”

She took a deep breath. “Ben,” she said shakily. She was so nervous. It took her three times to dial his number correctly.

“Rey?”

He recognizes her voice so easily.

The fact comforts her.

“Rey?”

She didn’t say anything.

“What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“I’m okay —

“You’re not okay,” his voice is stern.

“I tried running away. I just want to go home. Please don’t be mad at me.” The baby woke up and started to cry. The sound of distress didn’t make her feel any better. She felt more nervous and frightened.

“Where’s the baby?”

“He’s with— me,” she swallowed, clutching onto the phone. “I’m scared. I want you to come here.”

“Where are you?”

“I’m at the subway station —

“Just stay where you are, okay? I’ll be there soon.”

“O-kay.”

It was then that she realized she still had the bracelet around her wrist.

Ben doesn’t ask her why she tried to leave.

She’s sorry he knew by the way she was holding him tightly and softly sobbing into his shirt.

He just takes them home. No questions asked.

He takes them home and they had a bath together. A warm bath always calmed her nerves. After bath they got dressed and he took them back into the basement instead of the bedroom.

“Why are we here?” she asked as she held their baby.

He kissed her forehead.

“I’m going to get some takeout for us. Is there anything in particular you want?”

“Anything is good,” she said softly, blinking. He sees it, her reluctance on the tip of her tongue. But she swallows it for she knows not to take another step over the boundary.

He nodded. “I’ll be right back,” he said as he kissed her before locking the basement.

Benny always brings back Rey home.

Benny brings her back to her senses and reminds her that she couldn’t make it out on her own.

Ben doesn’t mind where Rey is as long as she was with their son. Because she never does anything rash when she was with Benny.

His wife’s pregnancy wasn’t an accident. Her pregnancy wasn’t unintentional.

It was needed.

To keep her from withering away.

It was needed.

To keep her innocence alive.

On the night he took her, he wore all black.

Gloves and all.

He wore a mask.

7. What Happened to Rey? pt II

It always broke his heart every time she tried to leave.

Because it reminds him of the night he took her.

It wasn't in the spur of the moment. It was calculated.

It was carefully planned.

He soundproofed the basement weeks prior. He pinpointed her exact location from following her patterns and recording her habits.

On the night he took her he covered up all the cameras. The gas station's. The street lights'. The city's. He wore all black. Gloves and all. And he wore a mask. And he broke the lock of the bathroom that kept her safe.

He did not take her right away.

No.

He knelt down and touched her hair and followed the folds of her blanket. He was soft. But she was much softer. He left her undisturbed for an hour before waking her himself.

Before she could scream in response he covered her mouth with a cloth with chloroform. He packed up all her things as her unconscious body laid on the dirty gas station floor. The place smelled of dirt, gasoline, and urine.

Ben cleaned the evidence thoroughly and restored the lock and cameras before taking her into his car and driving off.

It was a perfect kidnapping.

He never done it before but he's studied other people before that night.

Rey did not know what Ben did for a living. He talked about work all the time but it occurred to her that she didn't know what he did. She didn't find out until he brought over some of his friends one night.

She was still in the basement. In the early stages of her pregnancy.

He ran over things to her and gave her clothes to wear and makeup to put on.

"I thought you said you didn't have friends," she said as she pulled over the blouse. She was dressing in front of him but she was used to him.

"They're more of acquaintances from work," he explained as he smoothed the wrinkles out.

Rey nodded and put on some lipstick.

"Will you say something?"

"I won't," she reminded him. She wouldn't dare. He trusts her. Loves her enough that he wants to show her off.

He kissed her cheek then. Tenderly.

She nodded as she brushed his hand to the hem of skirt. She's pregnant but she still wants his mouth on her. She would never say those words out loud, she's too embarrassed and prideful to. But he knows, he knows what she wants.

"After dinner," he told her with halflidded eyes.

He carefully examines her during dinner. He had brought over his two close acquaintances, Hux and Phas. He keeps his gaze on her, making sure his Rey says the things they've discussed hours ago. Rey. Twenty two. Recently graduated college and is looking for work as a teacher. They met at the coffee shop.

“It’s finally nice to meet you, he talks about you all the time,” Phas said.

“Really?” she blinked.

His heart skipped a beat. She sounded so surprised. And pleased?

Phas chuckled and shot Ben a look. “Every chance he gets.”

“We didn’t believe he had a girlfriend,” Hux laughed. “He showed us pictures and all but you know how Kylo is, he’s very quiet.”

Rey blinked. “Kylo?”

Ben stiffened. He forgotten about that — how could he forget that?

“Yeah… Kylo,” Hux said slowly.

Ben interrupted them and changed the subject.

She waits for them to leave. “Why do they call you Kylo?” she asked.

“It’s a long story,” he explained, touching her face. “Ben is my birth name. But I only let a few people call me that.”

“You let me,” she raised her eyebrow.

“Because you’re very special to me,” he stroked her cheek. “Names are very important to me, Rey.” He called her by her name. He gave her everything in their first encounter. He gave her himself.

He watched as her lashes hit her cheeks.

“You have pictures of me?”

“You sound surprised,” he mused. He stalked her. Took her. And impregnated her. And she’s stunned that he has photos of her?

“It’s just they’re probably not the photos you would want to share with coworkers.”

“Why is that?”

She shrugged. “I probably don’t look like this in the photos.”

“Like what?”

“All dressed up and nice.”

“They think you’re perfect for me,” he reminded her.

“I didn’t speak much —

“Neither do I. You’re just like me.”

She’s attached to him. The realization occurs as she’s laying on her bare back on the table. Her legs parted for him to taste her. His mouth is there, his breath hot and warm.

Her whole life she wanted life beyond routine.

With him it’s just another routine.

He keeps her locked up while he’s away. And when he’s back, he gives her things. Talks to her. And then they’re intimate.

It’s her new routine now. They’ve been doing this like clockwork that she’s used to him — that she feels off when he’s gone too long and it interferes with their sex life. She doesn’t quite like it but she does enjoy it. He knows how to make her feel good and he holds her tight too. She likes that.

It’s routine.

But it’s a routine that they do together. Share together. She doesn’t mind it.

She doesn’t mind him.

She hates it when he’s gone for too long. She hates when he’s gone for days. Sometimes weeks.

“Where do you go?” she asked, pulling him by the hair lightly to stop for a second. Almost tenderly.

“What do you mean?” he asked as he flicked his tongue along her clit. She was dripping and she tasted so sweet. He slowly edged closer for more. To go back again.

“Where do you go that makes you go for so long?”

Benny flinched.

“What’s with you man?” Max asked as he hit Benny again with his mitt.

“Huh?” Benny blinked.

“You were zoning out,” Max laughed.

Benny shrugged. “Something was on my mind,” he said as he followed his friends.

Practice had ended and they were walking to get some burgers. They were going to meet up with Joss there too. Joss gets out of her art class around this time.

“What?” Greg asked as he popped in some bubblegum in his mouth.

He shook his head. “It’s nothing.” Except he kept thinking about the way Dad went cold with the photos. Dad is a real easy going guy. He doesn’t lose his temper like other dads. But when he does it’s frightening. Dad’s voice gets low and stern and every word that comes out is an order. It wasn’t like those were photos of Mom naked or anything. They were just photos of Mom. Except there was something off about the photos — Benny just can’t put his finger on it.

Benny shook his head and focused on the conversation. Max and Greg were talking about seeing a new movie that’s coming up.

“We need to watch it. We need some kind of action in our lives,” Max said.

“Hey guys what’s going on?” Joss asked as she took some of Greg’s fries.

“We’re talking about seeing the new movie and trying to figure out what’s with Benny?”

“What’s with Benny?”

The boys shrugged.

“He’s all spaced out,” Max explained.

“It’s nothing,” Benny explained. “It’s just — earlier I kind of got my dad upset.”

“What did you do?” Joss asked.

“Nothing — it was an accident — I accidentally went through his private drawer.”

“Did he beat you?” Joss asked.

“Well no —

“Did he scream?” Greg asked.

Benny bit his lip. He couldn’t help but to feel that he was just overthinking it. “No — he just told me to be careful next time.”

“Adults are funny with their privacy,” Max shrugged.

“Is that it?” Greg took a bite of his food. “You were all worked up over that?”

“No —

Greg smirked. “The question is what did you see inside?”

“I saw very weird pictures of my mom —

“Was she naked or something?” Max asked.

Benny glared and scrunched up his face. “Ew no that’s gross. No she wasn’t. She was fully clothed and all —

“Then what’s the problem?” Joss said as she stole another fry.

“I don’t know it’s just the way the photos were taken — it’s not a big deal — what bothers me is that — I know it’s silly it’s just — I never seen my dad like that before.”

“Come to think of it I can’t imagine your parents ever being mad,” Joss said.

Benny’s one of the few kids that can say that he’s not afraid of his dad.

Dad is a very forgiving person. Very calm and kind. Dad doesn’t mind taking him to the bookstore and waiting the whole night for a new book release. Dad doesn’t mind when Benny forgets to close the door in the basement when he’s practicing. Dad doesn’t get mad when Benny accidentally breaks things or forgets to clean the table.

To think of it, Benny’s never been yelled at before.

Dad’s not that type of person. And Mom certainly isn’t.

His parents are very calm people.

And Benny gets that from the both of them. Because Benny’s never acted out before. Benny always does well in school and all the teachers liked him. Not all the kids like him though. They think he’s too much of a teacher’s pet and a dork but he doesn’t care. He has everything he needs. Friends and a mom and a dad who loved each other.

“Mom,” Benny called out for her.

“Yes?” she looked up.

“The other day — I accidentally went through dad’s drawer.”

She blinked. “What did your father say?”

“He told me to be careful.”

“Well then there’s nothing to worry about,” she smiled and touched his curls. “What to do you want to do today—

“I saw something.”

Rey stiffened. “What did you see?”

“Nothing — I just saw photos of you at the coffee shop and park and a couple of gas stations. I never seen those photos before. I wonder why dad keeps them in his private drawer.”

“Oh those photos,” she said glossing it over. “Your dad was testing out his new camera when he took those photos. He was trying to be artsy but they weren’t that good,” she laughed. “But he likes to keep them as keepsakes.”

“Why does he keep it in his private drawer?”

“Well the photos aren’t really good to be honest. Come on, most of the photos are blurry or cut off.”

Benny couldn’t help but to feel silly. That made a lot of sense. “They were really bad photos,” Benny laughed.

She smiled. “Get dressed Benny, we’re going to go out and do something fun.”

It didn’t occur to her that she didn’t know much about just found out hours ago that he goes by Kylo. With the exception of his parents, Ben was a name for her and only her.

He would go to places and be gone for days at a time. Sometimes a week.

He would come back with bruises and scars that she did not make.

“Where do you go?” she asked.

“I work Rey.”

She frowned. She did not know what he worked as either. She was carrying his baby and yet she barely knew him. But she knew he was well off and that he lived comfortably by how he buys her things all the time. It amazes her how he can talk to her about many things without talking much about himself. “What do you work as?”

“I work for the FBI.”

8. Benny

Rey and Ben still have sex in the basement from time to time.

When they want to not worry about making a sound that's when they go there.

The basement is not as nice as its used to be since now it's home to Benny's instruments and served as a hangout spot for Benny and his friends.

But the basement was still the place they conceived their child together.

And they want to have another child. And it was very difficult to try when their son was in the next room.

Because Ben likes to let go. He likes to just have his way with her. And hold nothing back.

He likes to hear her moan and whimper and watch her wither underneath him.

Tonight is one of those nights.

He carries her out of their bed and into the basement. He holds her like the night he took her and locks the door in the same manner. Haste. Secretive. Except the lock is on the inside now instead of the outside. And that their son was deep asleep upstairs.

And she is wide awake.

He kisses her softly.

"How did we do this years ago?" she asked as she was placed onto the couch. They've been trying for almost two months and she still wasn't pregnant.

“Well once we started we didn’t stop,” he chuckled. “And we were younger then.”

She was a teenager then. And he was in his late twenties. “It doesn’t feel like it was that long ago.” She was twenty eight now, still fertile but not as fertile as she was when she was in her teens.

“It doesn’t.”

He sat beside her.

She touched him then, traced her fingers along the texture of his face. “Do you remember that night? How I touched your face for the first time?”

Ben curled against her hand with closed eyes. “It was in the day time I believe. And we were here.”

“That I remember well.”

“You touched my mask first.”

She smiled. “Because you were wearing it.”

“And then you touched my face.”

“I took your mask off.”

He nodded. “You weren’t scared.”

“But you were,” she said as his eyes opened and stared into her. He looked so much of a lonely boy.

“And I went upstairs in guilt. I realized what I’ve done.”

“I’m happy you took me,” she whispered. “You made me into something.”

A girl from nothing. He was something. And they were both lonely. And she was very lucky.

There's a softness to her face. She shows every emotion. Fear. Sadness. Confusion. Terror. Pain. Loneliness. Everything but weakness. And that's what draws him to her.

He touches her wrist and watched the bracelet dangle. He waits for the next expression of hers.

Her eyes flicker, delicately.

"You're an FBI agent?" she asked.

Ben nodded. He shows her his identification. Badge and all.

Her fingers graze against the emboss of it. She's still perplexed. Frozen.

"Does that change how you feel about me?" he asked a loaded question. No emotion. No trace. At an even voice. He does this so well.

She shook her head. "It's impossible to think worse of you," she tells him. She grasped his fingers to touch her belly to touch what he had made in her. He eagerly obliges and feels her stomach. He looked up at her. There's no disgust in her expression just acceptance.

"I just assumed you were some sort of business man — the way you're always on your laptop and go on trips and get me things."

Sweet girl. He gave her a small smile and took off her bracelet. She lets him. Lets him kiss her hand. "There's a lot of reports and writing to the job."

"How did get into that job?" she asked as he pressed his mouth on her wrist.

"My mother was a politician and my uncle was head of the police department. It sort of fell on me."

"Do you like it?"

"Very much so."

They love each other. They tell each other everything. They're honest with one another.

She knows what's inside of his private drawer, down to the last item.

There are no secrets with them for they shared the same secret with one another. That Ben took her unconventionally but he stole her heart. And they're happy.

When they finish they go back into their room. He carries her. He always carries her.

They usually sleep in the basement and get up before Benny does but Rey wanted the softness of the mattress.

"I want to see the photos," she said as Ben pulled the covers over her.

"You've seen them a million times," he chuckled.

"Still," she grinned.

"Fine."

She thumbs through the photos as he pulled her close to his chest.

"I look so young here," she said, showing him the photo of herself staring outside a jewelry store. She was so scrawny and flat and yet he wanted to have his way with her. She couldn't help but to be pleased and flattered. She nibbled his ear.

"You do. I really wanted to take you that day," he told her.

"Did you want to fuck me?"

"Do I even have to answer?"

"Yes," she said.

"Yes," he responded, swallowing the lump in his throat. She feels it, him becoming aroused. And she wants that. She wants him to come in her again.

This made her beam. “What did you do?” she asked. She knows the answer but she likes to hear it. She touched his beautiful hair and intertwined her legs against his thick thighs. Oh god, she loves this man so much.

“I came home and I relieved myself. I stared at the recent photo I took of you and jacked off.”

“Why didn’t take me then?”

“I knew it was wrong so I didn’t.”

Rey continued to nuzzle him. She just want to hear his voice. To provoke him. She likes that. “You could have talked to me you know? I would have just followed you.”

He flipped her so he could be on top of her and kissed her. “I didn’t think you’d want me.”

She stole a kiss. A quick peck. “You’re silly. Of course I want you.”

“I’m very awkward.”

“I still want you.”

And just like that she watches the loneliness fade from his eyes and spill against her skin. He was nuzzling her throat, grasping her — grasping her good wrist. Not the bad one.

She tossed the photos to the floor and lets herself drown underneath the waves.

Benny decided that he did not like Mr. Dameron.

He does not like the way Mr. Dameron looks at his mom.

It’s a small town and he and mom ran into him twice this month outside of school, one at the grocery store and one at the mall. And those two times that Benny observed Mr. Dameron looking at his mom was

enough for Benny to conclude that he did not like Mr. Dameron. Because Mr. Dameron probably looks at her like that at the PTA meetings too. (Well technically it's not a small town, the population is 100,000 but still).

Benny knows that his mom is pretty but there was something unsettling about an older man staring at his mom like that. Mr. Dameron isn't old old, but he is older than his mom. And Mr. Dameron knows that she is married but it doesn't stop him from staring at her wolfishly.

Other men look at his mom but it's different because it's Mr. Dameron. His teacher.

It's very inappropriate.

Mom is too kind though. She doesn't know when someone is flirting with her either. It has been that way since Benny could remember. And it was Benny's job to protect his mom.

The earliest memory he had of men making advances of his mom was when he was five. They were at the park and Benny was playing in the sandbox. And that's when it happened. A heavily intoxicated man came and sat besides her and put his arm around her. He said things that Benny couldn't comprehend but remembering feeling panic as he watched his mom try to push the man off. Benny ended up saving the day by throwing his pail at the man.

Benny has a very pretty mom, he knew this since forever. Growing up strangers always confused him for her brother. It's because Mom is so pretty and small. People always assumed that she was younger. It's gotten better since Benny is older and almost at her height. They can see that Benny is her son and can protect her.

Mom is about to leave for the PTA meeting until Benny stops her.

"What is it?"

"You can't wear that," Benny explained.

Rey examined her outfit and raised her eyebrow. She was dressed in pants and a form fitting shirt. “What’s wrong with what I’m wearing?” she laughed. She wasn’t wearing a short skirt or anything. She was dressed modestly with a bit of style.

“Your shirt is cut too low,” Benny explained. It’s a high V-neck shirt but it was loose on her. All her shirts hung loose on her. She was small that’s why. It’s freaking weird having to explain things like this to Mom but Dad’s away. Dad will be gone for a few days. Her hair is done all nicely and down too instead in buns.

Rey laughed and pulled over a sweater. “You’re worse than your father sometimes,” she teased. “I’ll be back soon okay?” she kissed Benny’s cheek. “Call me if there’s anything wrong.”

Rey barely recognizes Mr. Dameron tonight. His face is clean shaven. There were no traces of his once full beard. He looks ten years younger. Less homely.

“Good evening Rey,” he greeted her.

“Mrs. Solo,” she corrected him. “Good evening.”

“Sorry Rey,” he said again with a small smile.

She couldn’t help but to find his incompetence endearing. “I really wished you didn’t call me by my first name.” She sat down then. He sat down next to her but a seat apart.

“Mrs. Solo is so formal though,” he countered.

“I am Mr. Solo’s wife and he is a very formal man.”

Mr. Dameron gave her a small smile as he blew a lock of hair from his face.

“I barely recognized you without your beard,” she commented. The PTA meeting hasn’t started yet since parents were still getting some

punch and cookies.

“I thought it was time for a change,” his fingers touched his cheek. “Do you think it looks nice?”

“It’s different and nice.”

“I haven’t had a clean shaven face since I was a pilot.”

“You were a pilot?” she couldn’t help but to be fascinated by that fact.

Mr. Dameron nodded. “I was a pilot.”

“Do you miss it?”

Before he could answer the meeting started.

Every time Rey shows some progress, he slowly takes her closer and closer to the bedroom. They’ve been having sex frequently before she gets deeper into the pregnancy. They do it on the table. On the couch. On the stairs. On the bed.

But every time they finish he takes her back into the basement and locks her up.

He’s afraid. He’s afraid she’ll leave.

He’s getting more nervous and frantic. He doesn’t trust her to sleep with her in the basement anymore. He’s afraid she’ll leave while he’s asleep.

But doing this is counterproductive for the more she gets close to him — the more he shuts her out. And the more he puts her back in that damn basement the more he loses her.

He’s already lost her the second he stole her.

And it breaks his heart that he’s hurting someone he loves.

He wants her in his bed. He wants to be vulnerable with her and not worry about her leaving. He wants to be able to cook with her in the kitchen. To watch TV together. To go back to their favorite coffee shop as a couple. To show her to Mom and Dad.

"Careful," she winced, nudging him away from her breast. Her breasts were swollen and sore. And it wasn't helping that he was sucking on her so hard.

He stops. "You okay?"

"I'm feeling very queezy," she said as she pulled up her dress strap.

"We can stop." She was feeling nauseous. "Let me get you some gingerale."

He usually cuffs her to the bed post while he leaves her be in the house for a moment but he forgot. It didn't hit him until he was midway pouring gingerale for her. Ben ran back.

But she was still there. Sitting on the dresser, right where he left her.

"Where's my gingerale?" she asked kicking her feet back and forth.

He blinked. "I sort of blanked out — I'll be right back."

She takes the drink without a second thought. Takes the gingersnaps he brought for her too.

"Do you crave for anything?" he asked, touching her cheek. She was chewing and couldn't help but to touch her, to feel her thin skin stretch a bit.

"Chocolate," she said without hesitation. "Bagels — potato chips — a lot of things really. I want to go to a store and pick out what I want."

"I'll get the things you want — just write it down for me —

“I want to go to a store,” she stated clearly. “I want to go out besides doctor visits. Just little things.” It’s not an order. Not a command. Only a request.

“Will you say anything?” he asked the mother of his child.

“I won’t.”

“Will you?” The least he could do was give her food.

“I won’t,” she grasped his hand.

There were was no place for her to go.

He knows that. And so does she.

He puts on her coat and then his. And gets the keys from his drawer.

She knows the rules. She knows to latch on to him in public. Hand around his arm. Sometimes hand in hand if he’s lucky. She can speak in public. She say everything but their little secret.

She’s been craving junk food, something that he doesn’t give to her often. She’s pregnant though. And she wants food that were high in oils and salts and sugar. Maybe she wants the food because it reminds her of her days before him. Her days living off of fast food and junk food.

“Get the cart,” he tells her.

She does.

Ben pushed the cart and followed behind her as she went through every aisle and grabbed what she pleased despite the items being high in sodium and fillers. “What kind of chips do you like?” she asked.

“I don’t eat chips.”

Rey doesn’t seem to hear. She’s too absorbed into the aisles. She’s like a little girl in the candy store. Or rather a homeless girl no longer worrying about money and food.

“Is there any place you want to go?” he asked her as they got into the car.

There was a pause. She was thinking about it. Watching her think was always fascinating. She looked puzzled, her eyebrows knitted. She bit her lip and pursed it. “I want to go to the coffee shop.”

His skin tightened. “Why?”

She shrugged. “I miss just being there.”

He misses it too. He wants nothing but for them to go back together but he’s afraid. He’s afraid if being there will trigger something from her. She will speak out. He knows. But she might just be like this. She might be alright and happy being there but it’s too dangerous to go.

“Next time,” he said smoothing it over.

“But you just asked —

“I changed my mind,” he said in a certain tone.

“I won’t say anything,” she promised.

“Next time, okay?” he vowed.

“Okay — Ben,” she began, changing the subject, kicking her feet back and forth. She likes doing that, following the motions of the car.

“Yes, Rey?” he calls her by her name.

“Can we go to Target instead? I want to look at stuff for the baby,” she said as she took out her candy bar and began to munch on it.

“We can do that.” They needed to get things. The baby’s not born yet but they need to get ready.

“I can’t picture you as a pilot,” Rey said to Poe the second the meeting ended.

“Why is that?” he tilted his head at her in amusement.

She shrugged. “I don’t know — it’s just you’re so homely. And you’re known for your work in droids.”

“Who’s told you that?” Poe chuckled.

“Well you have a droid.”

“And?”

“I looked it up,” she explained.

“So you’ve been looking me up?” he gave her a smug smile. His eyes glimmered playfully.

But Rey did not notice this. “I wanted to make sure the students were getting a teacher that was actually a science teacher. How long were you a pilot?”

“Not very long — for a few years.”

“Why did you stop — if you mind me asking.”

Poe shrugged. “It was just a life before. Things changed. What was your life before?”

“Before?”

“Yeah. Who were you before Rey?”

“What did you do before me?” she asked lowly as he took her back into the basement.

Ben didn’t respond.

Instead he places her back into her bed.

She sits up. Defiant again.

This relaxes him, it gives him a reason to why he keeps her here.

“I know you had a life before this.”

“I just worked. I just survived.”

“There was more to your life, I feel it. I’ve seen it. The photos you keep in drawer. Of girls before. Who were they?”

“When did you —

“Earlier today.”

“They were girls before you. Just a memory.”

“Did you take them as well?”

“No.”

“How can I believe you?”

“Why would I lie to you?”

A pause.

Exhale.

Breathe.

“What happened to them?” she asked biting her lip. He caught her interest, he knew. There was this side of her that always wanted to know more about people. Sometimes she asks too much. She doesn’t know her boundaries.

“It just didn’t end well. They all felt I was distant, too depressed.” He’s only been with three girls in his life and yet she was acting like he dated many. But she’s never been with anyone else besides him. He sees it, she feels threatened.

“Why did you take me? What makes me different to deserve this?”

“You remind me so much of myself. You were so lonely except you had nothing. You didn’t have the privileges I have. You were alone. I just wanted to keep you safe.”

“Where do you keep the photos of me?” she asked.

“In the drawer.”

“I didn’t see them —

“You probably didn’t look hard enough or had enough time to sneak around,” he recalled to her when he went to get her some gingerale.

“Can I see them?”

He does. He shows them to her. All of them. She’s holding them in in her hands. Still. He held his breath, waiting for a response.

“I look so young in these,” she stated.

He looked down and examined the photos. These photos weren’t even a year old and she looks so different now in the flesh. She looks older now. More of a woman than a teenager. Her cheekbones and jawline now are more defined. Her face isn’t as round or soft as before. Before he took her. Her features are more pronounced. More feminine. Her breasts were bigger and she had more definition to her curves and legs. Her hair had grown in longer too. “You do.”

“I can barely recognize myself.”

He nodded. Neither could he.

Silence.

“Do you have any recent photos of me?” she asked, locking her eyes at his.

“Recent?”

“Yeah since I’ve been here.”

“No.”

“I feel like you should. My body’s going to go through changes. It’ll be nice to look back years from now.”

Her words reassure him. Ben took out his camera as she sat on his bed patiently.

“Should I smile?”

“Whatever you want,” he told her softly.

She smiles though. It’s staged but it makes him light up still. That she’s putting in effort.

“Can I take a picture of you?”

He nodded, stammering. “Of course you can.”

He sat there, letting her have control.

She takes several photos.

She tells him to stand.

He does.

She takes several photos.

She tells him to take off his clothes.

He does. She doesn’t have to say it but he knows that she finds him attractive and wanted a keepsake for when he was away. He wants one too.

She took several photos. They were polaroids. And they were spilling on the ground.

They didn’t stop to see the photos developed.

She just kept taking photos.

And then there was no more film.

He puts more in and takes off her dress.

He takes a photo.

And then he took off her bra and underwear.

He takes a photo.

Several.

Until there was no more film.

He puts more in.

As he does this her hands are touching his cock. "I know what you want but I want a few pictures for when I'm away from you." Ben already plans where to put the photos when he was at home. He'll have them locked up in his nightstand.

Rey nodded and placed her mouth on the tip. He positions her to get a good view.

He takes a photo.

It feels so good.

Her cheeks are flushed. She's eager.

He takes another photo.

And then he pressed her to the bed and rubbed his tip along her cunt. Until she was wet. But then he stopped. "I want you to touch yourself. I want something to look at when I'm away from you."

She does so.

He takes pictures until he had to stop to refill the film.

"Go on her knees and bend down."

She does.

He likes the view. He rubs his dripping cock along her wet folds. But he doesn't go in.

Rey let out a frustrated moan.

"Almost there baby," he tells her, watching her juices dripping. "I just want to take one more photo." The second he took the photo, he

paused to lick the juices dripping down her thighs.

He grabbed her then and positioned for her to sit on his lap. He faced the camera to them and moved her hair to the side to kiss her neck. He pressed the button as he gave her several hickeys that overlapped one another into roses. He pressed the button as he grabbed her breasts with one hand. He pressed the button when he put himself inside of her.

It went on like this, with the last photo being of come spilling and dripping from his sweet girl.

He has her on his chest. She's breathing deeply from exhaustion but she was alert as they went through the developed photos. To see their expressions together. To see how much they enjoyed being together. And she enjoys every moment of it.

He kissed her forehead. He loves his girl. He feels it's the night to sleep together here, in his bed. "I wished there was a way I could capture the sound of your voice."

"Do you have a video camera? We can try recording ourselves."

"Who were you before Rey?" Mr. Dameron asked.

"I wasn't anything special," she tells him. "Just any normal person."

"Don't say that."

"Well — there's not much to me. I got married right away and had Benny."

"That's something to be proud of."

"It's not what you do though."

"What did you originally plan to do before having a family?"

Rey opened her mouth but nothing came out. Before Ben came along she didn't have much plans. Her only plan was to survive and make it by.

She didn't think about having a career. But back then she was a minor and was on the run from the foster system. She kept telling herself she'll figure it out when she turned eighteen. "Well I got a degree in teaching but then I met my husband. And my husband's work keeps him away. So it was only reasonable for me to be a stay at home mom."

"There's nothing wrong with that. You've done a great job with your son."

"Thank you. Do you miss being a pilot?"

"I think you asked me that question already," Poe laughed as they headed to the parking lot. "I miss it from time to time. But I need to be grounded. It'll make me live longer," he laughed. "Building droids keep me alive."

"I really do wish you bring the droid that my son always talk about. How come you don't bring your droid to the meetings?"

"My droid finds them boring."

"Really?"

"He has a personality of his own."

"I would like to see your droid."

"I'm going to give a lecture at the community college. You should go. It's tomorrow night at seven. I'm going to show my droid and other prototypes."

"I'll be there."

"I'm going to go to Mr. Dameron's lecture at the community college tomorrow," she tells her son when she got home.

Benny frowned. "By yourself?"

“Yeah. I know tomorrow you usually hang out with your friends. I don’t want to force you to go to something that you’re not into. Don’t worry I’ll pick you up the same time at eight thirty. The lecture’s only for an hour.”

“Why are you going to Mr. Dameron’s lecture?”

“I’m just interested in his work,” Rey laughed. “Don’t worry I won’t embarrass you and show baby pictures or anything —

“Does Dad know?” Benny asked. Benny knows his dad. Dad’s fine with anything as long as you told him in advance. This was out of the blue. Short notice.

“I’m pretty sure dad will be okay,” she laughed. “It’s just a lecture —

“But did you ask Dad?”

Rey frowned. She didn’t like the tone Benny was using. “I don’t need your dad’s permission to go to a little lecture.”

Benny shut his mouth. He wanted to tell his mom that he didn’t like or trust Mr. Dameron but didn’t. He didn’t want to make his mom worry. Benny knows his mom has innocent intentions but the thing is she’s not very good at reading people. Dad knows. And Benny knows.

Mom is kind but too kind.

She is too trusting.

And there were some people in the world that like to take advantage of that.

Her going to the lecture sounds harmless but Benny doesn’t know what’s going on in Mr. Dameron’s mind.

Benny apologized though for speaking to his mother that way and hugged her. “I’m sorry.” He meant it. Mom wasn’t doing anything wrong. She was just going to go to a lecture, a public place. Not to Mr. Dameron’s home. She was going to be at a lecture with hundreds of people. In a public setting. And pick Benny up after too.

“It’s alright,” she held him tight. “Benny you know that I love your father very much, right?”

“Yes.” This he knows.

“There’s no one else I ever want to be with.”

“I know — will you tell Dad?”

“Of course. Your father and I tell each other everything.”

And that made Benny feel better.

And it made him feel happy for Mom.

Because when Dad is away, usually Mom just lingers in the basement.

And for once she’s going to go out.

It’ll be good for her.

In the middle of the night, Benny woke up to the sound of his phone. It was probably Max again. Max probably wanted him to stay up and finish their game online. The guy has to stop calling him and freaking sleep for once.

Benny waited for his eyes to adjust. It was midnight.

Benny let the call go to voicemail but the phone rang again.

He groaned and reached for his phone.

Dad.

What?

This was serious.

Benny immediately swiped to answer. “Dad?” Benny yawned.

“Hey Benny, sorry for waking you up.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong Benny,” Dad said lightly. “You okay?”

“Yeah I’m fine. I’m just tired — there’s something wrong, isn’t it?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Your mom called me earlier. She told me she was going to see your teacher’s lecture tomorrow.”

Benny was quiet. Dad sounded very calm. But Dad wasn’t calm if he was calling Benny in the middle of the night.

“Benny?”

“Yeah, Dad?”

“I was wondering if you can go with her. I don’t want her to get lost. It’s such a big campus.”

“Mom can manage.”

“Benny,” his Dad said in orderly tone.

Benny’s eyebrows furrowed. “Yeah?”

“I know you want to spend time with your friends but can you at least once just miss a day?”

“Yes, Dad.”

9. Growing Up

Men are attracted to his Mom.

This was nothing new.

Benny knew his Mom was attractive.

But he's never worried because Mom and Dad are crazy about each other.

But this… this was different.

Even though Mom is showing no signs of interest, Benny feels threatened because Mr. Dameron is attractive and Dad was gone. And it's especially different that Dad feels threatened.

But Benny knows his Mom. And Mom loves Dad. She loves him. Benny knows. He knows by the way she looks at Dad — he's always on her mind. She always texting and calling up Dad when Dad's gone.

But maybe the problem wasn't Mom's loyalty. The problem was that she can be taken. It's kind of hard for Benny to explain — taken is the wrong word — but Mom was fragile. So small. And someone could easily overpower her.

She had been observing the details of the basement. The locks. The cracks. The floors. Her captor. The placement he keeps the key in his pocket. His movements. She should be so lucky that he hadn't touched her yet. But that can change at any time. Her mind was working as fast as she could.

He… touches her — but just her hair and face. And he holds her — but those things don't count as touching. Touching was at the legs.

Touching was her chest. But the things he does were harmless. But she can see the inkling in his gaze that he wants more.

Rey was not safe.

He will touch her.

If she wanted to leave she needs to find a way to get the key from his pocket.

But being that close to him required touching.

There were no weapons she could use in the basement.

There were books and bookcase…

She stared at it, at the weight.

She couldn't help but to wonder — if she got him next to it — could she manage to tilt it over?

Huh.

She goes over her plan until he comes.

He speaks to her as usual.

And she decides to speak back.

She watches his eyes lit up and his shoulders uncurling.

He strokes her hair — she strokes his back.

He stiffens in delight from confirmation. And smiles at her.

She couldn't help but to stare back. His expressions were the ones of hers when she received any ounce of affection. Expressions of gratitude and appreciation and fondness. This was not a face of her kidnapper. It's just a lonely boy. Rey shook those thoughts of empathy and exhaled and stood up, keeping her fingers in his hair. He followed, stood shakily. She took a step forward — he took a step back.

She took another step —

he followed.

And another.

And another.

She touched his face, making him lock on to her — he was barely breathing. And he was staring at her — in a way she had never seen. A gaze of want. He wanted her. Her heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, ever so slowly she snaked her hand to his pocket —

he grabbed her hand and placed it at the crotch of his pants.

She contemplates about hurting him there but she doesn't. She didn't have the heart to after he looked at her like that. No one had ever looked at her like that.

Instead she decided to entertain him for a while. She touches him, gently kneads and massage him through his pants. It felt like dough in her hand and like dough it was rising and expanding.

An abrupt breath escaped from his mouth.

And that was when she dug her fingers into his pockets and snatched his keys.
She ran as fast as she could but he snatched her by the waist.

The lonely boy was gone.

She fought back.

She shouted and twisted. Kicked and screamed. To a point the large man was struggling to contain her. And that was when she used all her strength to bring forth the book case.

The book case fell on him and then her.

She scrambled to wriggle herself out from the weight.

He tried dragging her back but she slashed him with his own keys — right on his face and made a run to the door.

She knew what key to use — she had memorized which one. Adrenaline was running through her veins and she was fumbling to unlock the door. He's coming — she can hear him.

She ran out and made her way out.

But she had never been outside the basement.

And she didn't know how to get out.

It was like a maze.

And somehow she was in the kitchen — he grabbed her again.

She turned and saw him — she sees it — the slash on his face. He was bleeding from the slash.

It didn't stop her from hitting him.

She managed to escape from his grasp — she grabbed the nearest thing she saw on the kitchen table — it was a stun gun. She can use this — give him a taste of his own medicine —

It happened to quickly.

His hand on her wrist.

So quickly that she didn't see it coming.

She winced. Screamed.

"Don't ever do that again," he warned, squeezing his fingers tightly. He was angry — she can feel his anger transferring to her arm.

"You're hurting me!"

He didn't stop. He kept squeezing.

"You don't want to see me when I'm angry," he warned as blood dripped down his chin.

It hurts. It really hurts.

"Please — stop," she begged.

He didn't listen.

"Hold still," he told her. He handed her a soft towel to chew on as he examined her wrist. He went pale in horror. He had broke her wrist. His finger marks were on her. And she was crying. "I'm sorry," he lowered his tone. "I didn't know what came over me."

Ben untangled himself from her to get her some painkillers.

He can hear the chains moving frantically. He didn't want to chain her but he had to.

"Don't worry. I'm just going to get you some medication."

He came back with pills and water and a bag of ice.

"I'll be right back," he told her gently, touching her cheek. "I need to look up how to treat your arm," he kissed her forehead. "I'm so sorry."

Ben would have apologized longer but he knew he had to act quickly.

"Mom," Benny called out for her.

"Yes Benny?"

"I was wondering if I can go with you tonight," he said.

Rey blinked. This was odd. "You rather go with me to a lecture than hang out with your friends?"

He nodded. "Yes."

"Honey, you don't have to."

"I want to Mom."

She frowned. She saw right through it, the falseness and insincerity. "Did your father tell you to go with me?"

“No -no,” he stammered.

“Benny. Tell me the truth,” her tone was stern.

Benny frowned. “I— yes. Dad doesn’t want you to go by yourself. He’s afraid you’ll get lost.”

“You don’t have to.”

“But Dad —

“Well I’m also your parent and he’s not the only one that makes the decisions.”

She still goes.

By herself.

But not out of willingness but out of spite.

She was fuming. Angry that her husband wasn’t honest with her about his discomfort of her going. She had even called him up last night too and he told her he was fine with her going.

Rey: I know

She texted him. Her mind was elsewhere. Even though the lecture was going on she could not focus. All she could think about was her husband. Her stupid husband being insecure over petty things.

Ben: Know what?

Rey: I know that you asked Benny to spy on me

Her eyebrows furrowed as she bit her lip. She stared at her phone watching the typing indicator notification appeared before her.

Rey: Do you honestly think I would be unfaithful?

She wasted no time in getting down to the point.

Ben: I'm sorry.

Pause. He was typing more. Pause. Typing more.

Ben: I trust you but I don't trust him.

Rey: There's nothing for you to feel threatened about. I can't even look at another man. You're the father of my child. You're my husband. I just want you.

Rey: I'm not mad. I just miss you. So. much.

Rey: I can't even focus on this lecture. I just keep thinking about you fucking me.

Ben: Tell me what you want me to do when I come back. I'll do every single thing you want, sweetheart. I love you so much.

She pressed her legs together.

Rey: In the morning, when you get back, I want to drink your come. I want to swallow everything.

He hasn't been letting her since they've been trying to have another baby.

Ben: Why?

She couldn't help but to smile. He knows why but he wanted her to spell it out.

Rey: I love the taste. Miss it.

She does.

Rey: I want to suck you dry.

She does. She doesn't let any drop go to the floor.

Ben: What else do you want?

Rey: During breakfast I want you to finger me under the table.

Ben: Will you be wearing any underwear?

Rey: No. And I want you to suck my juices off from your fingers in between bites. I'll be making your favorite breakfast too.

Ben: Can I put my fingers in you?

Rey: Yes since you'll be emptied out in the morning from me blowing you off.

Ben: How many fingers can I put?

Rey: All if you can.

Ben: When will I fuck you?

Rey: When Benny's away in the afternoon. I'll be making your favorite dessert.

Creampuffs. She wanted him to eat his cake and her fuck her too. Remind him how good he has it — how great of a wife he has.

Rey: And I want you help me fill in cream in the creampuffs while you fuck me from behind too. I want to be filled with your cream.

Ben: I always overflow in you. What do I do with the excess come?

Rey: I want you to wipe it off with the creampuffs and make me eat it.

Ben: Fuck.

Rey: What is it?

He was aroused, she knew. She can feel his excitement. And hers.

Ben: I'm hard.

Rey: What do you want me to do?

Ben: Can I touch myself?

Rey: No. I don't want you to come. I want you to wait until you're home.

Ben: This is my punishment isn't it?

Rey: Not even close. I made some videos for you last night when I couldn't sleep. I'll send them to you when I come home. You can watch them but you can't come. I want you to skype with me. I want to see you watch them and make sure you're not touching yourself.

Ben: Will you be naked?

Rey: Yes. I want to tease you. I want you naked too. I want to see you get hard.

She can already imagine it, him whimpering as his cock was throbbing and gradually standing on its own. And him begging for him to touch himself as he tried to watch the video she made and watch her play with pussy at the same time.

Ben: I really want you right now.

Rey: Same. I'm really wet right now.

Ben: Can you touch yourself for me?

Rey: No. I'm at the lecture. People will see

She knows he's groaning right now.

Ben: I love you. I'm sorry for overreacting. It was silly of me.

Rey: I know!

She put a laughing emoji and then a heart emoji.

Rey: I'm not even mad anymore. I think you being jealous is cute.

Ben: What do you want me to do during the night?

Rey: I want you to have your way with me. Punish me for teasing you the whole day.

Ben: You're such a little slut.

She couldn't help but to smile. She sent a winking face emoji.

Ben: I'm going to be rough with you when night comes.

Rey: What are you going to do? It sounds like you're all talk

Ben: I'm going to take you down to the basement. Strip you down and tie you up.

Rey bit her lip in longing.

Rey: And then what?

Ben: I'm going to hit you for being such a whore

Rey: I can't help it. I love how you make me feel.

Ben: I'm going to clamp your nipples and put you on my knee and spank your ass

Rey: but what if it turns me on and I get wet?

Ben: I know you're going to get wet.

Rey: What are you going to do to help me stop?

Ben: I'll keep you tied but make you stand up with your legs slightly apart. I'll clean that mess with my mouth. I know how much you get hot when you're wet so I'm going to cool that pussy down with some ice in between.

Rey could imagine it already — his mouth on her — her legs trembling to stand still. Her buckling down to let his mouth touch her. And in between, ice running along her slickness. She can already imagine the sensation between cold and wet and hot and warm. And him pulling away every so often to smirk at her with her juices glistening on his mouth.

Ben: You're imagining it now, aren't you? You're such a little whore.

Rey: I know you're thinking about it too. I know I'm your whore.

Ben: What am I?

Rey: Mine.

She put a heart emoji.

Ben: Tell me who made you such into such a whore.

Rey: You.

Rey: I was virgin before I met you

Rey: But you came and you made me yours. And you fucked me so good.

Ben: How do you know? You've never been with any other man but me

Ben: If you want me to fuck you, you have to beg the whole time.

Rey: I know baby

Ben: Once you're done coming on all the dildos and my hand, I'll put your legs over your head and fuck you.

Rey: I want that

Ben: And I'll fuck you against the walls. I'll slam you on the wall and the floor and pound into you. I'll pull your hair the second you stop calling out my name.

Rey: Don't stop. I want you to get me knocked up.

Ben: Did you take a pregnancy test today yet?

Rey: Yes. It was a positive but I still want you to come into me to make sure I'm knocked up.

Ben: Sweetheart, that's great! I really hope we have another child.

Rey: Me too. I kind of want the baby to be a girl.

Ben: We have no control in that.

Rey: We'll love the baby no matter what.

Ben: And if it's not a girl we can try to have another one — if you want.

Rey: I want that

She was about to type something else until she heard clapping. She looked around — the lecture was over. And she didn't listen to any of it. Rey couldn't help but to feel guilty. She was so absorbed in flirting that she didn't pay attention. But she sees him — Mr. Dameron. He was still on the stage, staring at her. He managed to find her against the crowd.

It kind of amazes her.

Throws her back a bit.

She waved at him and smiled back. She remained seated as the audience stood up in clusters and dispersed.

He gestures for her. For her to go on the stage.

She checked her phone first, checks the time. She has some time to talk to him before picking up Benny.

"So what did you think?" he asked as he continued to pack away his droid prototypes and samples.

Her eyes locked on to the beeping droid staring at her. It was more of a ball than anything else.

"It was — I'm sorry I barely paid attention. Something came up with my husband." She didn't want to lie.

The droid beeped.

"I didn't think it was boring," Rey said quickly, glossing over the droid's sass.

Poe blinked. "Did you understand what my droid said?" he asked, perplexed.

"I guess I did?" she shrugged.

“I only programed my droid one language — a language between me and him.”

My name is BB! The droid said to her in excitement as he rolled to her.

She laughed. The droid reminded her of a little child, honest and bright eyed. “My name is Rey.”

The droid moved about in glee but then froze. He stared at her and then made a comment.

She blinked. “I must have a common face, I think I would have remembered you,” she said answering the droid’s inquiry.

“I’m glad you came,” Poe told her. “Even if you didn’t listen.”

“I’m very sorry — something came up with my husband and me —

“Are you two alright?”

She nodded. “Yes, we’re doing fine now — I’m sorry I didn’t really listen to your lecture.”

“It’s okay. I give boring lectures anyway,” he laughed. “Do you want to get some coffee right now?”

She lit up. “It depends. Like I have to pick up my son in an hour.”

“It’ll be quick. There’s a Starbucks in this campus.”

“We can do that — but I’ll warn you I can be there at most thirty minutes.”

He nodded. “Got it. I don’t mind —

“Hold on,” she said. “I’m getting a call. Hello? Benny? Yeah that’s fine, honey. Just call me before you sleep and in the morning.”

“What’s wrong?” he asked the second she put down her phone.

“It’s nothing. My son just called saying he’s going to stay over at his friend’s house tonight.”

“Oh? Well maybe we can go somewhere nicer than a Starbucks.”

“It depends — where do you have in mind?”

She likes Ben’s attention. She likes being the center of his focus. His fondness. His obsession.

The photos in her hand tell her so.

She doesn’t want him to want anyone else but her.

Photos of him fully exposed. His cock hard. Throbbing. And photos of her eagerly and willingly pleasuring him. And photos of them together as evidence that they enjoyed being intimate with one another.

Rey does.

She liked being taken control of. There was something about it — something very comforting about it. That he wants her, and only her and wasn’t going to leave her. Ever.

“I’m sorry for trying to leave,” she said to him again. She didn’t know what came over her to take her and the baby to the subway station. But being here, being back in the basement and seeing the old photos again reminded her how much she loved Ben. “I did not know what came over me.”

He petted her. She adores it. “It’s alright. You called me right away when you came to your senses.” He gave her a soft smile. It was tender. It was hers. He was hers. She never had anything before him.

“I don’t want to ever leave you,” she said with all her heart as she held their baby. “And I don’t want you to ever leave me.”

“Don’t cry,” he wiped her tears. “I’m never going to leave you.”

“But you said you would if I tried running away again,” her mouth was quivering, recalling their first Christmas together. When she tried to run away.

“People say some things that they don’t mean when they are upset. Do you mean the things you say to me when you are upset?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“I will never leave you,” he pressed his head against hers. “I’ll never leave you or our baby.”

She rubbed her face into his skin. “Ben,” she said his name.

“Yes?”

“Do you promise?”

“Yes, I promise.” He kissed her mouth. It was salty from her tears. He liked the taste.

“Ben — I— I want something.”

He moved back and gave her his full attention. “What do you want?”

“I want you to bring Benny’s crib down here and I want you to put on your mask for me.”

It was strange. Surreal.

Watching her Ben come down the basement with the crib dressed in the outfit he had wore when he took her. On the night that he took her, he wore all black. Gloves and all. He wore a mask. But the mask wasn’t on yet. It was in one hand while the other was holding the crib.

She bundled their baby.

Ben took their baby and put him in the crib. Ben put a pacifier in the baby’s parted mouth.

And then he put on the mask.

Her heart skipped a beat. They did not think this through.

It sent chills down her spine seeing him like this. He seemed taller. Bigger. More of a monster than a man.

It takes her back.

It takes him back.

Step by step.

He came closer.

Rey took a deep breath. But this was still her Ben.

And they made something beautiful. And he was sleeping in the crib peacefully.

She moved her focus from the baby to him.

He nudged her down to sit on the ground.

She does.

And he knelt down in front of her.

She felt his gaze burning, it burned the most when his face was covered.

They don't have that story.

The story where they meet and fall in love.

They don't have the story where their child can appreciate it.

Maybe if he's grown he would.

There was something different about the mask. She's not sure if she had changed or if he had changed but there was something sensual about the mask. And him dressed in all black and leather gloves.

They were thinking the same thing.

He tore her clothes.

Ripped them until she was bare. One of her favorite outfits, gone.

He pushed her down — she lets him.

He grabbed her legs — she lets him.

His mask was still on and so was every article of clothing.

There was something about being completely exposed in front of him that made her aroused.

With no warning he's fingering her.

But she likes it.

His was wearing latex gloves. And those fingers were in her.

He's usually eating her out, dripping in her arousal at the corners of his mouth. But not right now.

The gloves are thick and every movement of his fingers are thick and staggered.

"Ugh," she moaned. It felt so good. She was very wet. His fingers were sinking in with ease.

His fingers moved to her breasts.

With both hands he squeezed her nipples. Milk was dripping. It wasn't much — she fed the baby earlier — but ah, it felt so good. He usually sucks the excess greedily but he's not doing that.

He's depriving himself and her.

"I want you to suck my dick." He pulled her and positioned her to be on top of him, facing the other direction, her pussy at the mouth of his mask.

She's riding him and sucking him off as if he didn't have a mask on. As if they were doing sixty nine normally.

But they weren't.

She was the only one bare while he was still clothed with his pants pulled down slightly.

She was sucking him off perfectly, eagerly — bobbing her head back and forth and occasionally sliding a portion of his length down her mouth. But he couldn't eat her out.

Seeing her wetness dripping and glistening and splattering on to his mask — it turned him on. It turned him on that he could not taste her but that he could see her fully. Every so often he would finger her. Buck his hips. Shove himself deeper into the warmth of her mouth.

Even when she couldn't breathe, he kept shoving his cock. It was swelling in her mouth. Pumping. Twitching. He kept fingering her, running his gloved fingers along that small pussy of hers. He decided mid way to take off a glove and finger her. The sensation of flesh was too much for her and she came seconds after.

When she comes — it was such a pretty sight.

So much, she came so much.

And he got such a good view how much she comes.

So much that its seeping into the breathing holes of his mask.

But he takes it in gratefulness.

"Sweetheart," he called out for her. He doesn't even let her have a few seconds more to calm down after coming so much.

"Yes?"

"Go get the camera. I want you to take a picture of how much you came onto my mask."

He stayed on the floor, watching her stumble upstairs for the camera, come running down her legs.

She took two photos, like he instructed.

First the close up photo of his mask.

And second a whole photo of him lying on the ground, come on his mask and dick standing on its own and veiny, dripping in precum.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked him. She threw the polaroids on the floor.

"Give me the camera and ride me. And after I'm going to convince you to never leave again."

"What are you going to do?"

"You'll find out once you ride me."

"Well, it depends," Poe explained. He went on one knee to fix BB-8's antenna. "Did you eat dinner?"

"No."

"Same — do you want to get food instead?"

"I don't see why not. I need to eat anyways. You should tell me your lecture then."

Benny did not tell his Mom which friend's house he was staying over at.

He was staying over with Joss.

But it wasn't a big deal since his Mom did not ask him. But she will find out tomorrow.

Things were different now since Benny was older. It's funny because two years ago it wouldn't be an issue. But he's twelve, at the age when boys and girls can't be around each other the same way anymore.

But Joss is his friend.

And he did not understand why a boy and a girl cannot just be friends.

It makes him think about his mom and Mr. Dameron and it made him feel guilty for thinking something could happen. Mom loved Dad and even if he didn't know what Mr. Dameron's intentions are, Mom still loved Dad and wasn't going to let that go.

He trusts his mother, the way he believes that a boy and a girl can just be friends.

Joss is pretty. She has long curly blondish brown hair and blue eyes. She's funny. And artsy. And she's one of his closest friends.

But he doesn't see her in anything else but just a friend.

They are eating boiled hot dogs and a watery salad that Joss' mom made for them. It's not the best but they were both pleased because her mom put the effort to make them something. They like it the best when her mom doesn't drink. She drinks when she's sad. But now she's getting help.

"I know hot dogs aren't exactly gourmet — the chicken didn't taste well," Joss' mother said.

"It's okay, this is still good. Thank you," Benny said politely.

"You guys can still have your sleep over just make sure you stay in your bed," Joss' mom winked at him playfully.

He always does. He always sleeps on the pull out bed.

"Mom!" Joss exclaimed, her cheeks blotchy red. "Benny's just a friend!"

"I know, you two grew up together."

"Exactly!"

"I'm only kidding, Joss."

Benny kept quiet until her mother went to the living room.

“Your mom’s really trying,” Benny said. To be like my mom, he wanted to add. But he didn’t because they both knew.

“I know. It’s just strange having her around so much, she’s usually off somewhere else. But I’m happy — it’s just not… easy.” Easy as in not easy quitting. Having to deal with mood swings and relapses.

Benny nodded. “I’m here.”

Joss wanted him to be here so her mom would be on her best behavior.

“How are you doing with your mom being out with he who should not be named?”

“She texts me every half hour about what she’s doing. I’m fine with Mom but not with Dad. He’s a wreck. He keeps asking me about her.”

Joss laughed.

“What?”

“I think it’s kind of cute.”

“Cute?” he raised his eyebrow. “What’s cute about my dad freaking out that my mom of all people is going to cheat on him?”

“It’s just… nice,” she shrugged. “That after all these years they’ve been together he’s crazy about her.”

Huh. He didn’t think about that. And that was something coming from Joss especially. “It is nice.”

After dinner Poe went straight home.

“BB did you get good footage of her?” he asked.

BB-8 nodded.

“Come on,” he gestured for his droid to go into his personal office. He hooked up his droid to a few wires and connected him to his laptop. “Project the photo,” he said to his droid.

The droid did so.

It was a photo from the droid’s memory years ago. It was a flier, of a missing girl. Children go missing all the time, but there was something about this photo that cemented in his memory and the droid’s. They were both drawn to it seeing it years ago while passing a city. Not this city but a neighboring one. There was photo of her and the date when she had gone missing. There were other details but there wasn’t much. It was sad for all the other fliers of missing children had more information and more contact numbers. This girl only had one, her foster system’s number. She didn’t have a family.

Poe examined the hologram. And then pulled up the estimated/computerized estimation images of the missing girl as an adult. Those estimations were never accurate since it was only a guess. He closed the estimation images.

“Now project the captured footage of her,” he said.

The droid did so.

Poe ran through about an hour of footage until he found one that was clear and zoomed up at her face. He paused it and screenshotted it.

He pressed a few buttons and typed to enable the program to examine the features of the flier to the screenshot.

Poe’s eyes wandered back and forth, watching the lines dance about.

The program stopped analyzing and beeped.

It was a perfect match.

10. Growing Up pt II

There was going to be a dance this Friday.

It had been announced about a month ago but everything's happening so fast.

It's just a dance, Benny thought. And yet everybody's acting as if it's the most important thing in the world. People have been slowly pairing off and asking each other out since the announcement.

It's really strange to him, how people like each other so fast and because of one little event. It feels out of nowhere to Benny, purely situational. Hell, even Greg has a girlfriend now, Allie from his English class. It's so odd to Benny — it felt so sudden and unnatural and natural all at once. Things were changing. Benny knew it was bound to happen but he didn't expect it so soon and fast.

Benny doesn't even want to go but Mom's making him go because she wants to take a picture of him all dressed up.

"I don't want to go to the stupid dance," Benny mumbled to Max and Joss.

They were riding their bikes around town.

Greg wasn't here because he's too busy walking Allie home.

Max agreed, shaking his head. "What's a big deal about this damn dance? It's all everybody's talking about and who's boyfriend and girlfriend."

"Ugh. Tell me about it."

Joss rolled her eyes. "Come on guys, it is our first dance."

Max and Benny exchanged mortified looks. "You're into this corny crap?" Max asked.

Joss rolled her eyes again.

“Oh yeah I forgot, you’re a girl,” Max said then.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Joss asked.

“Well, you’re a girl so you’re into that stuff,” Max explained.

Benny bit his lip, gesturing for Max to shut up.

But of course Max didn’t.

“Shut up,” Benny said underneath his breath. Max says pretty insensitive stuff sometimes but you can’t really blame him with the way he grew up.

Benny ended up being sidelined as his friends began to bicker. He wanted to stop them but there was nothing he could do.

“Screw you!” Joss shouted. She biked the other direction. But it wasn’t to her home.

“Wait! Joss!” Benny called out. Ah, he should have said something earlier. “Aren’t you going to go after her too?” he asked Max.

Max shook his head. “Nah, she’s mad at me. It’s better that I give her space.”

Benny nodded and peddled after her.

She’s locking up her bike right now, in front of a coffee shop.

Benny followed her as well. “Hey, you okay?” he asked.

Joss bit her lip. “You should have said something earlier.”

Benny frowned sheepishly. “I know — it’s just — I don’t like being in between fights —

“I know Max doesn’t mean the stuff he said but you should have stuck up for me, you know?”

“I’m sorry.”

Joss bit her lip but gave him a smile. “It’s okay. You’re sweaty,” she commented, laughing.

“You’re really fast,” he laughed. He looked at the coffee shop sign. “Hey let me get you a cookie, my treat.”

Naturally Joss agrees.

This makes Benny relax because who can ever deny a free cookie? And just like that, things feel back to normal. That he’s hanging out with his friend who happens to be a girl.

“Oh my god, is that you Benny?” Mr. Morris the coffee shop owner asked.

“Hi Mr. Morris,” Benny greeted him. It’s funny, because Mr. Morris is acting like he hadn’t seen Benny in years. Benny was just here like a month ago.

“Benny! Oh my god you’re getting so big!” Mr. Morris said with a fond smile. “I remember you when you were just *this* small,” he lowered his hand to a size of a baby.

Benny smiled politely. He likes Mr. Morris. He was a nice guy, a family friend almost. If Benny could describe the position of Mr. Morris it would be a great uncle. He’s not like Grandpa Luke who’s mystical and all, Mr. Morris is a friendly guy who you can talk to about anything.

“You just look like your father,” Mr. Morris grinned. “Oh and this must be your girlfriend.”

Benny shook his head. “No, Mr. Morris. She’s just my friend.”

Mr. Morris winked at him. “I can always tell, Benny,” he chuckled smugly. “You know my gift already. I can tell who are meant to be together. I knew off that bat with your parents when they used to spend their days here. I knew it was destiny for them to be together.”

“I know,” Benny laughed. “You told me the story a million times.”

“I want to hear it,” Joss chimed as Benny gave her a cookie.

Mr. Morris smiled. “His mother used to sit right over there,” he pointed to the seat. “And his father used to sit on the opposite side,” he pointed again. “They were really shy people back then. I’d always catch them stealing glances at one another. I just knew they were going to be together and before I knew it they came back to the shop months later pushing baby Benny in the stroller.”

Joss smiled with stars in her eyes. “That sounds so cute.”

“It was. Your parents are wonderful people,” Mr. Morris said to him. “The best people I know. I can see it now, you too are still too young but one day.”

Benny grimaced as his ears burned. The whole pairing off is so awkward to him. “Can I get a cookie?” Benny asked, ignoring Mr. Morris’ comment.

Mr. Morris gave them each a cookie and juice, on the house.

They thanked him and ate outside of the shop.

“I think Max is just upset he doesn’t have a date,” Joss said as she took a bite of her cookie.

Benny shook his head. That doesn’t sound like Max. “No he’s just mad that he’s forced to go.”

“How do you feel about it?”

Benny shrugged. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “I never been to a dance before so it’s not a big deal to me —

“Neither have I,” she laughed. It was going to be everyone’s first dance. “It sounds like you’re just nervous,” she assured. “It’ll be fun. I got a dress,” she added.

“Really?” he’s trying to picture her mom and her shopping together. It makes him perk up because her mom’s trying really hard.

“It’s not a new dress — my mom let me have a dress that she wore when she was our age. It’s pretty — it’s blue and has cute straps— she’s going to help me put makeup on too and do my hair.”

Makeup on a twelve year old feels too young to him. He feels the same about people pairing off and holding hands and acting all sappy. But he doesn’t say it though. Instead he nodded. “I’m sure you’ll like nice.”

“I really wanted Cody to ask me to the dance but he asked Kaila,” she sighed.

Benny raised his eyebrow. “Cody? You like him?”

She nodded.

“Since when?”

“For like a while — you’re just so blind — are you going to ask someone?”

He shook his head.

“You’re probably like the only person who doesn’t have a heart in school,” Joss joked.

“I feel like a lot of people like each other because they want to like and be with someone, you know?”

“You’re such a kid,” Joss smiled.

He feels like he’s going to be a kid forever. Forever not understanding everything around him.

Mom and the rest of the PTA made the gym really pretty. There’s pastel balloons everywhere and twinkling lights. Instead of punch and

cookies on the table there's cans of soda and Mom's tea sandwiches and cupcakes. Mom's one of the chaperones. She's the prettiest mom ever and it's a reminder by how she looks tonight. She is dressed in a mid length dress and a white cardigan and has red lipstick. Her smiles were always so pronounced whenever she wore red lipstick. There's something different about Mom, she's been glowing for a few weeks but he doesn't know why.

Maybe it's because Mom likes things like these. She got him a new suit for the occasion and even a real tie and did his hair too. She took about a hundred photos of him and his friends — or rather him and his friends and Greg's and Max's date. Last minute Max ended up asking Sherry from their PE class. Sherry's nice but Benny knows that Max doesn't like her and just wanted ask somebody.

Benny doesn't feel like he's left out though.

He's just sitting there watching everyone eating a sandwich. A portion of the boys and girls are divided and not dancing while the official couples are dancing and thinking that they're cool. No one can dance at twelve Dad says and Benny believes it. The dancers look so gawky and bump into one another every ten seconds. Joss is with the divided girl group. The ones with no dates and waiting for a brave boy to ask for a dance.

Benny's not going to be that boy.

Ben's parents fight.

But all parents do.

His mom is head of the household while dad can barely manage coming home for dinner.

It used to be Dad coming late for dinner that drove Mom crazy and now Mom's just happy if he comes before ten o'clock at night.

Dad being away is becoming more frequent and Mom is slowly accepting any bit of affection.

But Ben cannot blame Dad a hundred percent. Mom has a wicked temper and knows what to say to really set Dad off. She demeans Dad for not having a higher level job or picking up after the house. She complains how he dresses in ratty clothing and how he still drives around in that old Millennium falcon of his. Mom knows how to push his buttons.

But so does Dad.

He tells her that she isn't a good mother. And Mom always barks back and tells him that he doesn't love Ben the way she does.

They both feel so absent from his life.

Ben doesn't know why they fight so much. Or what caused it. Because they never used to fight this much before. But Ben's older now, he's twelve and he's starting to notice things.

Like how they don't even sleep in the same room anymore.

And that Dad is barely around.

And that Mom is starting to get old and worn.

But his parents do love each other, he reminded himself.

Because they're going to couple's counseling.

They never stated it to him but Ben put two and two together with their weekly outings.

They're trying to fix things.

And that's something.

Ben tells himself this as he tried to focus on his homework as he heard them yelling at each other downstairs.

He heard something breaking.

“Are you out of your damn mind?!” Han yelled.

“Get out of this house!” Leia screamed.

More items being thrown. At Dad.

Breaking.

Shattering.

Ben turned up his music. He’s not scared. He’s used to this. He’s used to Mom throwing things at Dad. Ben’s used to her screaming and Dad’s cursing. It’s normal for them. They will make up soon. They’re getting help.

“You’re a piece of shit!” she screamed. “Get out of this house!”

Ben hears the door slamming.

He flipped to the next page of his textbook and waited for his mother to come to his room and tell him it was nothing like she always does. And tells him that it was just a little heated debate.

But she didn’t.

Ben didn’t start to worry until an hour had passed.

She’s on the couch, crying.

His heart skipped a beat. She usually cries after she assures him that everything’s alright. But things aren’t alright if she’s too sad to put up a front for him. “Are you okay?” he asked her. He sat beside her to wipe her tears from her face. He’s been doing since he was a little boy, when he used to be smaller than her.

It feels strange that he’s taller to her now.

It made him realize how small she is.

She usually smiles and puts on a façade. “No Ben, things are not alright.”

Ben frowned. “What happened?”

“It’s over, Ben. Your father and I are not working out.”

“Mom —

“He’s been cheating on me.”

Ben blinked. That doesn’t sound like his dad. Dad loved her.

“I’ve known this for quite some time. For years. I’ve tried so hard to make this work but he doesn’t want to be faithful. He’s still cheating even to this day.”

Ben shook his head. “No — that — that can’t be —

“Ben,” Leia’s voice was firm. “You’re old enough to know the truth.”

In the middle of the night, Ben hears his mother weeping.

He goes to her.

As if he was the parent and she was the child having a nightmare.

Delicately he opened the door.

But he stopped.

Mom wasn’t crying. She was moaning. Dad was on top of her.

Ben immediately closed the door but with control. He doesn’t want to make this any more mortifying. It was better that they didn’t know that he walked in on them.

But it makes him feel slightly better.

Because they are together right now.

And they’ve been going to counseling.

And Mom was open about what was happening.

Ben was able to go back to sleep with ease.

When morning came, there's pancakes. And Dad's there.

And everything feels good again.

Mom is pouring Dad his morning coffee.

It hasn't been like this in a long time.

Until breakfast was over, that was when Dad called out his name. "Ben."

Ben stared at his empty plate and looked at his reflection before his father. "Yes?"

"Your mother and I are going to get a divorce," Han said gently. "We love you very much. Nothing's going to change."

Ben went pale. "What?" his voice cracked.

Han touched his son's cheek. "Things haven't been working out with your mother and I. It's for the best that we separate."

"Things will change," Leia clarified, holding her breath. "But for the better. There won't be any more fights. Your father's going to stay somewhere else but you'll still see him often."

"I don't understand," Ben felt his eyes burn.

"You know that we've been fighting for years like this," Leia reminded him, squeezing his hand.

Ben shook his head. "I know — but I saw you two last night." He turned to stare at his father.

"What?" Han's face went red.

"Last night I thought Mom was crying and I saw you two having sex. I don't understand — I thought that meant everything's going to be okay —

They didn't say anything.

Ben yanked his hand from his mother. "Why did you do that stuff to Mom if you didn't want to be with her?"

"You weren't supposed to know that," Han said sheepishly.

"I don't understand," his voice raised. "I don't — I — I you were saying that you loved her last night and now you and her are going to get a divorce?"

"It didn't mean anything," Hand said quietly. "It was just a… farewell."

Ben frowned. He didn't understand at all. He feels angry. He feels confused. "But you said you loved her —

"It was in the heat of the moment."

Ben went quiet and stared at him.

Han flinched in shame. "Everything's going to be okay, son. This isn't your fault —

"Of course it's not!" Ben stood up. Han sat there, frozen. "I blame you! It's your fault!"

"Ben," Leia said weakly.

Han didn't say anything. His son had every right to be upset.

"It's your fault!" he screamed at his Dad again. "You're a piece of shit!"

"Ben!" Leia called out his name.

"No don't defend him!" hot tears were coming out of his eyes. "All the things you said are true. You're scum," he hit his Dad. "You're a cheater and you're liar and a bastard," he kept punching Han's chest. "How can you hurt Mom like that after all these years! I hate you. It's your fault!"

Han let him. "I'm sorry, kid."

“You’re a horrible dad. You’re never there!”

He let his son put his anger on him and let his son repeat all the things that Leia said over the years.

Leia tried to pull Ben away but his anger took over him. He kept hitting his Dad. Leia had never seen Ben act like this before.

“You’re a piece of shit!” Ben yelled from the top of lungs, sobbing. “She didn’t deserve this!”

“I know.” He grabbed Ben and held him. “I know.” Ben kept hitting him.

“I hate you!” He tried to get away from his father’s grasp but he couldn’t. He kicked and screamed. “I hate you! It’s you’re fault! You’re a disgusting pig —

“I know,” Han said, holding his sobbing child tightly. “I know, kid. It’s going to be okay. I know.”

“Dance with me,” Joss dragged Benny to the dance floor.

Benny frowned.

“Come on, the dance is almost over. You should at least dance one time.”

“I don’t know how to dance.”

“You don’t know how to do a lot of things,” Joss teased. “It’ll be okay it’s a slow song. You can’t mess that up. Just don’t try to kiss me or anything.”

He laughed. “I can do that.”

“Did you have fun?” Dad asked when they got home.

“It was alright,” Benny shrugged.

Mom rolled her eyes and sighed. “You’re far too young to appreciate it.”

Benny nodded.

Dad laughed. “It’s okay I wasn’t into things like that at your age either.”

Mom sighed. “My Benny boys,” she said fondly.

Benny stared at his mom. “Mom.”

“Yes Benny?”

“Are you pregnant?”

Mom and Dad gave him a small smile.

“What?” Benny asked.

“How do you feel about having a little sibling?” Dad asked.

“Really?” Benny exclaimed.

Mom grinned. “Yes, we wanted to wait to make sure everything was fine before saying anything.”

Benny hugged his mom. “That’s great!”

“Ben,” Dad said.

“Yes?”

“How do you feel having a little sister?”

11. Two Dollar Coffee

Mrs. Solo was a very beautiful and loving woman.

She was a wonderful mother and loyal wife.

But to Mr. Solo, she will always be his Rey.

In his eyes no matter how much time passes, she will always be the same age that he took her.

He misses that time.

Those moments.

He clings on the most to the videos of her in her teens. When she was stubborn and adamant about loving him. From time to time he likes watching her fall in love with him.

She is no longer a girl.

She is a woman now. She is everything he had ever wanted.

She loves him.

He is happy about that but sometimes he misses the old days. He misses getting to know her and putting the pieces together. He misses seeing her slowly warm up to him. He misses seeing her slowly become attached.

He misses when time was abundant.

And now everything's going so fast.

Their son was growing up.

They cannot go back to the old days. They cannot go back to when it was just the three of them in the basement. With their world so small and close knit. Benny had brought so much joy into their lives but Benny had

brought a bigger life to their small world. A community. It can never be just them anymore. Not since Benny was four.

They cannot go back.

But with his wife's second pregnancy it gives them an opportunity to revisit.

To such a simpler time.

Ben remembers the look she had given him the morning after.

The morning following the night that he had taken her.

He had put her in the basement. Laid her on the bed. With covers and all.

And he waited.

For her to wake.

She scrambled to sit up. She blinked several times. She's disoriented, her vision slowly recovering. And when she sees him, she froze. There was no fear on her face. For she recognizes him. She knows him. The man she saw at the coffee shop. There was no fear on her face. Just confusion. Shock. "You… you… you.." The girl went pale.

"Yes," he told her. "I did."

The girl exhaled, attempting to fathom the events prior.

"I didn't do anything to you —

"You drugged me," her voice was still low.

She's not angry or scared. She was in shock.

"I just took you here."

"Where am I?"

“My home.”

“What do you want with me?”

“I want to take care of you — I don’t want you to be alone again.”

“Please I don’t want to be here.” She looks disappointed at him. As if she had known him the way he knew her. “Please,” she pleaded, tears trickling from her eyes.

“The streets is no place for you,” he countered gently. The sight of her tearing made him feel sick with himself.

“Please don’t go this way.”

He gives her a soft towel to chew on as he tended to her wrist.

She takes it for she knows it’ll help ease the pain.

She’s cooperative for once. She’s still as he followed the direction he had read up online.

Ever so often he would glance up and stare at her gnawing on the towel.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed.

The girl remained silent.

Ben proceeded to tend to her.

Once he was done, he held her. He comforted her. Soothed her. And she wanted it, he knew for there was no refusal. He handed her sleeping pills. Just two. And she takes them for she knew it’ll help with the pain.

“I thought you were a good man,” she said quietly. She said it in a tone that was not bitter or hateful. She said it in a tone of melancholy. Disappointment. “You had this calm exterior. You were always doing work. It was hard not to look at you. I cried so much on the day you took me.”

“I know,” he touched her wrist. “I know you did.”

“I didn’t know you but I had this perception about you. And when you took me all of it shattered.”

“I wish I could be the man you wanted me to be.”

The first few weeks together were rough.

She barely touched the food he had given to her. The most he had seen her eat was five to seven bites. She barely spoke to him. She barely acknowledged his existence.

“Is there anything you want?” he asked her again. He’s been asking her this every single day since he had taken her. “I can get you anything. Pizza, sushi, burgers —

“I want coffee,” she said.

He lit up. “What kind? What size? What —

“I just want two dollar coffee.”

Ben went silent. On the surface it seemed to be a simple request. The coffee she wanted was cheap and nearby. But it was more than that. That was what she always got at the coffee shop. It was part of her routine. She would go and stay there for hours. That was when she thought he was a good man. Before he took her. “I’ll be back as soon as possible,” he told her.

Mrs. Solo doesn’t remember things quite well.

Sometimes she gets things mixed up.

But Mr. Solo did.

He remembers everything clearly.

Ben remembers their first time.

It was on Christmas.

Before it happened, he decorated the basement. He gave her presents. He took her outside. To the city. He never intended for them to ever have a first time. That night he wanted to let her free.

The way she looked at lights was the way he looked at her. In fascination. In awe. In adoration. He gripped her hand tightly. Lovingly. He doesn't want to let her go. But he has to. "I love you," he tells her.

She stared at him then.

Ben smiled softly and touched her cheek. "So much," he exhaled. "And know I have to let you go."

"But you won't."

Ben shook his head. "I'm letting you go."

He expected her to freeze and burst crying in relief but she doesn't.

Instead she stood there, blinking in confusion. "You're lying —

"I'm not," he said calmly.

Frantically, she shook her head. "This must be a cruel sadistic joke —

"I'm not lying to you," he told her. "I'm letting you go."

She took a step back. "Did I — Did I do something wrong?" she asked him.

Ben's face fell. "No — I can't keep you," he explained to her gently. Desperately he wiped her tears. He pulled out an envelope and gave it to her. "Take this, it's a check. It'll cover about a year's rent so you can have a place to sleep when you come back from work. And save up."

"What did I do?" she sobbed.

"Nothing — I can't keep you," he tried to bring sense to her. "I know that now. What I did was wrong — I'm sorry."

“Why are you leaving me?”

“You don’t want to be with me.”

She shook her head. “No I do,” she grasped his hands. “I do.”

“You’ll be okay. You’ve done this on your own before.”

“Please — don’t let me go,” she sobbed.

She was following him, he realized. Like a stray dog. He felt as if he was a zookeeper who foolishly took an animal from it’s habitat since birth and now expects it to go back to its old ways. “You don’t have to follow me,” he told her. It was just them and the open space and twinkling lights. Everyone else was celebrating the holidays. “You can go,” he told her.

“I can change,” she said to him.

“You don’t want to be with me,” he told her. “You’re confused and it’s my fault. I’m tired of hurting you.”

“So I’m nothing to you then?” she asked. “I’m worthless — I’m disposable —

“Stop. You know that’s not true.”

She laughed bitterly, her eyes becoming shot wet. “I have no family. I have no friends. I thought you were different — I thought you wanted me.”

“I do want you but not like this. I did a bad thing to you — and I’m only fooling myself to believe that I could make this work.”

“Please don’t leave me. I don’t want to go away — I know I always say I hate you and hate being with you but I just say it — please, don’t leave.”

He must be insane.

Not for kidnapping a girl.

But for taking her back.

She's in his car and they're driving back to his home.

He should have let her go.

But what was he supposed to do? She did not want to go. She kept following him. And she begged to get in his car. She kept hitting the windows. And she stood in front of his car when he tried to drive off. And she kept looking at him with that face of hers. That sweet, tender vulnerable face of hers.

Kidnapping was one thing but to let her in again? To take her? Ben doesn't know.

She's clinging on to his coat, looking out at the window.

She's thinking the same thing. He could tell by the way she was chewing at the sleeve.

Perhaps they were both insane.

He lets her in. It disturbs him so to know that she wants to be here.

"I want to sleep in your bed," she said. "I want to sleep in your bed with you," she explained.

Ben's eyes widened. "Why do you want to?"

She doesn't respond.

And he already knew. She was shaken up from earlier. She felt as if he was abandoning her. He knew by the way she followed him. How she cried. How she tried desperately to get into his car. She wanted to be beside him. "I can't," he told her.

“This is punishment, isn’t it?” she asked. “For all the times I tried leaving you.”

“No it isn’t —

“It’s alright. I know I need to be here to earn your trust —

“No that’s not it. How about we try to find you a nice home? A nice family?” he offered her again. Her age had been on his mind since she had told him how old she was. “I’ll do an extensive background check — I’ll make sure you won’t get hurt.”

“I don’t want to go back to the foster system. Stop looking at me as if I’m a child. I’m not a child. Please. I’ll do anything to make you still want me. I’ll change — I’ll be good — just please don’t leave — please don’t let me go ever again.” She’s crying again. She’s clinging on to him. “Please don’t go.”

“Please don’t go.”

“I won’t I’m just going to get the heater — you’re cold— I’ll come back —

“Rey.”

Ben blinked. “What?”

“My name is… Rey,” she said.

Ben blinked again. He studied her. She had given him names before but this felt different. She was looking at him with those vulnerable eyes of hers. She’s clinging on to him, trembling. “I won’t leave… Rey,” he said tenderly.

She smiled softly, tears still running from her face. She responded to the name instinctively.

“Rey…” her name slipped out again and melted on his tongue. It was such a pretty name and it was her. She was Rey. His Rey — no she wasn’t

his to keep.

“Hi,” she said. “Ben.”

“Rey,” he said her name again. He wanted to say her name over and over before she was gone.

She kisses him then.

Ben pulled away. “No Rey.” He had dreamed about kissing her but not like this. Not like this.

“I’m not a child,” she breathed.

She kisses him again.

He tried to refuse but he wanted her so. He’s so weak with any affection she gives him. She’s kissing him with her hand groping his dick.

He’s so weak. He’s already on top of her and kissing her. It only takes her five seconds to change his mind.

“You can have me,” she whispered.

Ben moaned at the thought.

“You want that, huh?” she asked. Tempting him.

This was wrong but he can’t stop. He wanted her.

That night changed everything.

Nothing was ever the same.

He hated himself for sleeping with her. She was a virgin but she insisted that he kept going.

Even when she cried, she kept telling him to and selfishly he did.

“You’re crying,” he told her. He stopped thrusting and stared down at the bloodied sheets. His cock was covered in her blood and come. At his

tip was fresh come while at the shaft was dried pieces of it.

"I'm fine," she assured him, kissing him again.

"Why do want this? he asked.

"Because this is what people do when they are close."

"When they love each other," he finished her sentenced. He kissed her forehead then.

"I like this very much," she assured him.

"But you were crying." His heart skipped a beat as he heard her voice from moments ago when she said to stop and he didn't understand until seconds later that she was saying STOP. And now she's telling him to keep going.

"It's still my first time." She sat up to kiss him.

They have a very intimate relationship since then.

He takes her whenever he can. Which he tries for it to be often. Because she likes it. He knows by the way she feels so alive when he touches her. He knows by the way when he's not in the mood but she hints at it. She would never say but he knew.

She feels whole when he's inside of her.

He knows by the way she sighs and moans in relief when he's in her.

She feels complete when he touches her. Worships her. Ravages her.

During pregnancy, a woman tends to crave for foods she cannot have. Like sushi, deli meats, alcohol — for Rey she craved coffee.

But she could not have coffee due to the caffeine.

He gave her decaffeinated coffee from time to time in the smallest of amounts but it wasn't the same for her.

She lingered close to him each morning during her pregnancy just to inhale the scent of coffee from his breath.

“You’re doing so well,” he told her, touching her belly.

“I want to go to the coffee shop,” she told him.

“You know you can’t have caffeine, Rey.” Even giving her small amounts of decaffeinated coffee made him feel guilty and fearful of any risks.

“I don’t want coffee,” she told him. “I want to just go there and sit down — with you.”

Ben’s heart skipped a beat.

“I won’t do anything,” she assured him, squeezing his hand. “I won’t. I just want to be there.”

“Why?” he asked her.

“The place feels is home to me. I miss being there around people. Hearing the background music. Smelling the coffee. Staying there for hours.”

It’s always the little things with her that meant so much. “Rey —

“You can trust me,” she breathed, raising her voice. In frustration. She was tired of hearing his excuses every time she asked him to take her. He takes her out everywhere but there. “You can trust me — I don’t know why you don’t. You still make me stay in the basement when you are away— I’m not even allowed to sleep with you in your bed unless I’m handcuffed — Ben, you can trust me.”

Ben sighed. He had already taken so much from her. At least he could do was finally take her to the place she had been wanting to go since he had took her. “Alright we’ll go — it’s just —

“I won’t say anything — I don’t want to leave —

“No,” he cleared his throat.

“Oh,” she blushed. “Okay.”

He always wanted to fuck her before they went out. It wasn’t exactly a want but a need. He wanted to fuck her just in case it would be his last time. He took off her clothes and took no time in pleasuring her as he marked her neck.

She likes being fingered.

“Can I be on top today?” Rey asked.

“Can I take pictures?” he asked her. He wanted to photograph when she pulled out. He wanted photograph the come dripping out of her and onto his dick.

Rey nodded.

“Your mom’s pregnant?” Max asked again for clarification.

“Yup,” Benny nodded.

“Dang that’s a big age difference,” Greg said. “When the baby’s twelve you’ll be twice its age.”

Benny rolled his eyes. “I already know that — but I’m still excited though.” Well technically he’ll be thirteen years older but still.

“Don’t get us wrong — it’s good news — it’s just why is your mom having a kid again?” Max asked. “It’s just seems so late for her to have another kid.”

“You guys are idiots,” Joss shook her head. “This is good news.”

“It’s going to be a girl,” Benny said, ignoring his guy friends’ comments. “Besides my mom isn’t that old.”

Poe wondered how much the town knew.

Or if they knew.

Poe analyzed the data again. Benny is twelve, Rey was in her teens when she gave birth. She's not even thirty yet, Poe realized.

The realization makes him sick in his stomach.

His droid beeped.

Poe nodded in agreement. "Come on BB, let's take a stroll around town."

12. Forgiveness

She hates it when he leaves.

She's throwing food at him because he announced to her that he will be gone for a week.

"Stop," he told her firmly, snatching her wrists.

She sneered, hot tears presented to him. She's hitting him now, as if he had betrayed her.

"You know I have to go. I will be back," he told her softly.

"You're going to leave me," she cried. Pushing him.

"Sweetheart I'll never leave you. I love you."

She hates the very idea of being abandoned again.

"You left me once," she reminded him, rubbing her tears against his sleeve.

"I will never do that again," he breathed, pulling her to kiss her wet cheek. "Ever."

She lets him kiss her and then she kisses him on the mouth. It's not just one kiss. It's several. Melting in one another on his tongue.

He exhaled, feeling weak to her touch — her fingers are in his hair.

And then the back of his neck.

He gasped as he feel her fingers drag to his shoulders and down as she went on her knees.

She does this when she wants him. And that was when he had to leave. And when he came back.

He attempts to unbuckle his pants for her — but she's already doing it.

Ben's already getting hard as she's unzipping his pants.

"What time are you leaving?" she asked, holding his half hard cock in her hand.

"Five in the mor-ning," he mustered as she stroked him. She does it so well too — with soft fingertips tracing all over his cock and back to his leaking tip. He feels so weak in her hands. He comes so easily when she does this — blowing him off. Ben's embarrassed by this. One hand is just going up and down his shaft and purposely stopping before the tip to tease him — to push more precum out — squeeze it like he was a cow full of a milk.

"I want you to come twice times before you leave — at least once has to be inside me," she pleaded, squeezing his tip gently. Letting the precum drip out.

Ben whined. His cock twitching from her touch.

"This one will be in my mouth — I don't think you'll last very long." She massaged the tip with ease like a sponge — a sponge full of water and any little pressure made the water came out. She leaned and licked his tip in slow strokes.

His cock twitched again.

Her tongue felt so warm.

She's teasing him again.

He pressed himself for entrance.

But she refuses.

"Please," he begged, moaning. She was still licking his tip. "At least suck the tip," he touched her hair.

She shook her head. “You’re going to come really soon. And I don’t want that yet.”

He rubbed his tip on her face then. Dragging his cock from her cheek to the line of her jaw and then her chin. “I suppose you want me to come on your face then?” he asked, thrusting his cock at her throat. “Or how about your clothes?”

“Maybe my clothes then,” she snapped. She looks so sexy when she was flirting with him.

He ran his cock to the corner of her lips. “Would you want that? So you can smell me when I’m gone?” The very idea thrilled him.

She nodded.

“You’re such a whore.”

She blinked. “I’m a what?” she blinked again, her lips twitching. She looked like she was a second from cry—

She’s crying now.

He sat down on the ground immediately to hold her.

“No sweetheart — don’t cry —

“Why would you say such a mean thing like that?”

He wiped her tears. “No baby, I was just — you were just. You turned me on. I like the idea —

Ben found himself in the corner, unable to explain himself.

“Baby, it’s just a pet name — like the way I call you baby,” he told her, stroking her back. “Don’t cry.”

“Whore is such a horrible word,” she sobbed into his chest. “I don’t do things with you for —

“I know you don’t,” he stroked her hair. He blushed then. She doesn’t do things for money — she did things because she liked it — and

possibly she liked him. "Baby, it's just the same thing when you call me monster when we make love."

"Well I mean it though," she snapped, still clinging to his shirt.

Ben chuckled. "Then why do you keep telling me to keep going as you call me that?"

She pulled away and looked at him. She opened her mouth but found herself blushing as an answer.

"I'm your pet," he answered in a low tone. "The way you're my pet."

"Will you come on clothes for me?" she asked then.

He felt himself becoming aroused again.

It was all over town that Mr. Dameron was asking questions about his family.

How long have you known the Solos?

How long have you known Mrs. Solo?

Are you on good terms with them?

Tell me about them.

Are they a happy family?

What do they do?

The questions were endless.

Ben was starting to panic. The town thinks that Poe is after his wife. But Ben knew better. He had to act quick before something happened. It's the middle of the night and he's burning items that could be used as evidence.

The photos in his drawer.

Intimate videos he saved over the years.

His mask.

And Rey's old backpack.

He felt his body tremble as he watched their tangible memories burn away.

They're burning.

Melting away.

"It's okay," Rey whispered. She squeezed his hand and kissed him on the cheek. "It's okay," she said again.

He held on to those things for so long but now they're gone.

"Everything's going to be okay," she assured him. He was barely breathing.

They were an hour away from town, in the woods. With a small controlled fire. Wearing layers of clothing and gloves to conceal their prints.

Benny was at home.

Ben hates doing this — hiding this from their son.

He hates destroying their memories.

He held her hand tight and tilted his head down so she could kiss him more.

"I forgive you," she told him. Reminded him. "It's alright — it's going to be alright. I love you."

"I love you too," he held her as tight as he could — as long as he could. "I love you so much." He's still shaking. He feels as if he's going to lose her.

"I forgive you."

Mr. Dameron was not at school today.

There was a substitute.

And the substitute was playing a movie for the time being.

Instead of watching it though he and Joss passed notes about what to do after school today.

It was Joss' turn to decide and they were going to tell the others during lunch.

Joss as usual, was indecisive.

But Benny was bored and so he let her embrace her indecisiveness.

They passed notes back and forth during the whole period until Joss decided to just get some ice cream and go to the park.

Which was a typical day.

Except today didn't feel like any other day.

It felt off — and Benny couldn't explain it.

Things were normal.

The same.

Classes were the same (except for the sub).

Listening to Greg and Max fight about their opinions on movies during lunch.

Hanging out with his friends after school.

Except Mr. Dameron was not here today.

But teachers were bound to get sick.

But still, this made Benny uneasy.

The feeling's still on him too even though he has an ice cream cone in his hand.

“Hey dude, what’s wrong?” Greg asked.

“Yeah you’ve been in space for like a while,” Max agreed.

“I don’t know — something feels off.”

“Probably because you got the pistachio ice cream,” Greg commented. “That stuff tastes like shit.”

“I like pistachio -,” Benny paused. “I —

His phone rang then.

“Hey Joss — can you hold my ice cream?” Benny said as he reached for his phone in his backpack.

It was mom. Benny blinked. This was serious because she usually texts him when he’s out with his friends.

“Hello?” Benny said.

“Benny.”

His skin tightened. Mom sounded nervous.

“What is it mom?”

“It’s -it’s, I can’t explain. It’s — can you come home right now?”

Benny’s heart skipped a beat. “What’s wrong? What’s going on —

“Benny — I — don’t know what’s going — just come home right now Benny.”

13. Interlude

His dad works for the FBI.

From time to time he brings coworkers home.

But Benny did not recognize the people in his home.

His heart skipped a beat when he met his mother's eyes. She was sitting on the couch in distress. She's looking at him with worry and blankness. She had the same look as he did. He didn't know what was happening and neither did she.

"What's going on?" Benny asked, blinking several times as he gathered his limbs to enter his home. But it didn't feel like home. It felt like a prison. There were four people he didn't recognize, three men and a woman.

Dad was standing but he was stiff.

Mom was slowly touching her stomach.

Benny's skin tightened. This wasn't good for the baby.

"Please," Dad began before the people could say anything. "Let me explain to my son."

Benny examined the strangers in his home. They were from the FBI but they were not friends of his father. Benny could tell by their body language.

"Someone has filed a case on our family," Ben said slowly.

"A case?"

Dad exhaled. "Someone has alleged that I've been abusing you and your mother —

“That’s nonsense!” he quickly turned to the four strangers in the room. “It’s not true. It’s a lie — my Dad is a good dad — he loves me and mom — he would never —

“This is just protocol,” one of the men said to Benny. He said it in a calm tone. “Standard procedures.”

Benny felt himself relax. “So what’s going to happen?” he asked them.

“We need to do a background check on your family and close friends,” another man said. “You will be separated from your family temporarily.”

Benny blinked. He was… he was going to be taken away? “I don’t understand —

“It’s part of the procedure,” the woman explained. “Your father has a clean record — it’s just part of the procedure.”

“How long will I be separated from my mom and dad —

“It’s in the air,” the woman explained.

“It’s going to be okay, Benny,” his mother said.

Benny’s seen a lot of movies.

But none of the movies prepared him for this.

His father’s falsely accused of abuse.

In movies there would be twenty cops at the house.

There was just one in reality.

In the movies the dad would resist and have to be cuffed and dragged.

But Dad was not that person. His dad was not an abuser. He complied and went into the car willingly without any refusal.

In the movies it would be dramatic.

But it wasn't in real life.

It was quite calm.

But mainly because Dad is innocent. And that they told him this was just protocol.

The FBI agents did let him hug his parents but it was brief.

In movies and in the news they always show the mother and child together. Together at the hospital. Together under care. Together side by side.

But in real life he was being taken from his mother.

Benny doesn't know why he is being separated from mom if it's just his dad being accused of abusing them.

He couldn't help but to cry.

Especially when Mom's kissing his curls on his head.

He hugged his mom as tight as he could before they were sent to the hospital, sent in separate vehicles. They FBI agents told him that he and mom were going to be checked but he didn't know why they were being torn apart. In the movies and news the mother and child were always together.

"I feel fine," he told the woman. He doesn't understand why he's being sent to the hospital.

"It's part of protocol," the woman repeated.

"I'm not malnourished or hurt or —

"It's okay to be scared," she assured. "It's just we have to check just to be safe."

The people (more people. different people) confiscated his phone.

He doesn't know why they did.

Why was he being investigated?

If it's just dad that's been investigated?

It's hard for him to process everything — to feel what he wanted to feel. It's happening all too fast — he's barely registering it — he just knows the surface. It's all happening so fast— he was just with his friends — and then at home — and now here.

Being checked up.

And there's so many tests.

He feels so exposed.

With all the needles and tubes attached to him.

But it's just to be safe — the people had to do this because they've dealt with actual cases of this. Cases of kids all bruised up with broken jaws and malnourished bodies.

They're making him stay at the hospital over night.

It could be longer, he knew. But the people won't say.

"How are you feeling?" a nurse asked him as she brought in a tray of food.

"I feel fine — but know I'm sore from all the tests." The hospital spent hours on him with all their checkups. "I want to see my mom," he said. He feels like a baby for saying it but he didn't care.

He wanted to see his mom. His mom must be scared. She gets sad when Dad's gone. But now Benny's gone too. She must be terrified. She's all alone. Benny wanted to go and see and to hug her the whole night until this nightmare is over. He wanted to comfort her —

"She's in a different hospital."

Right. He was at the children's hospital and Mom's at the regular hospital.

"Why can't I have my phone?" he asked then. He was beginning to feel anxious.

"It's part of the orders."

"My dad is a good person," he said. He knows that she's not part of the investigation but he couldn't help but to say it. "He deals with missing person cases and —

"Soon you'll get to talk to your mom and dad on the phone," the nurse said, trying to ease his nerves.

Benny bit his lip. He knows it's going to be timed phone calls. And he knew that it's going to be a while before he could see his parents. And the thing was what did the nurse mean by soon? Soon as in an hour or a couple of days? Weeks? He felt like crying. He couldn't even talk to his friends.

He felt so alone.

Her lover does a lot of cases.

But the majority of the cases he gets assigned to are missing person cases.

This disturbs her.

He does so much good and yet he took her.

But she still lets him touch her. Kisses him.

There was something wrong with her.

Not the fact that she was heavily pregnant with his child.

But the fact that right now he's handcuffed to the bedpost and she's on him. Kissing him. She could leave but doesn't want to leave. And she

didn't want to leave when she wanted to. And when she had the chance.

She just wanted to stay with the man that wanted her.

She's naked with him, kissing him like a lover that he is.

And he's stroking her with his free hand, stroking her belly. Touching their child.

"I can't wait to see Ben junior," he tells her with half lidded eyes.

"How much do you love me?" she asked him.

He stroked her stomach slowly. "This much. So much that we created a new life."

He pressed on the button for assistance.

A nurse came within a few minutes. "How are you? How can I help you?"

"I need to go to school tomorrow," Benny explained, sitting up. "But I didn't get the chance to pack — the people said they would bring me some of my things." He tried to recall everything but it was all a blur. It happened so fast and he wasn't told about everything. Just the surface. He feels like he's a deer in headlights. "But they haven't yet —

"They will come by in the morning. You aren't going to school."

He opened his mouth and attempted to protest but he stopped himself. There was no use in arguing. She was not in charge of him. She was just following orders.

They all were.

When the nurse left that was when he pulled the covers closer to his face. He couldn't help but to cry. He didn't know what was going on. He wanted to be with his mom. All he could think about was to be with mom.

Dad was fine on his own, Benny knew. Dad's used to be being away from them.

But not Mom.

Mom was never fine being alone.

And neither was Benny.

When Dad wasn't around, it was him and Mom.

Always.

He doesn't understand why he's being separated from his mom. When will he see her? Tomorrow? The next day? A week? If it's just Dad that's being accused why is she taken away as well? Why is he taken away?

He found himself sobbing.

14. Interlude pt 2

There was still tension between them even after their son was born.

It's only been a few days since their son was born.

Ben was very stern with her, he kept her in her place. Made her rehearse every single night on how to act when his friends and family came to visit her and the baby.

Rey and the baby were still at the hospital for checkups. And he stays with them. Monitors them. Makes sure she doesn't do anything out of line.

It's frightening to him for her to be out in the public for this long. She can say anything at any moment to the nurses. To the doctors. His friends. His family.

He wants the whole hospital procedure to be done with. He wants to take her and the baby home already but they wouldn't be able to leave for another few days.

A part of him regrets that he didn't just deliver their baby at home. He had watched videos about it and read many books about it but it would have been a red flag to his family. Maybe it would have been easier if he kept her a secret. But Ben didn't want to strip away his child from a normal childhood.

His heart is beating. Frantically.

His mother is here the third day in a row visiting the baby — and talking to Rey.

He keeps his eyes on Rey.

And Rey kept her eyes on him.

Night time approaches.

And he waits for the nurse to leave.

He puts the baby away.

Unzips his pants and lets Rey sucks him for a bit.

Even being away from home this long is making her anxious. She's been blowing him off every single night they've been at the hospital in between the long gap at night between the switch of nurses. Even the day that she gave birth, she sucked his cock.

He should have denied her that day and made her rest but he wanted it too.

He pulls her by the hair. To go slower.

"I want to fuck you," he mouths to her. His own words make him shudder on how selfish he was. His girl gave birth only a few days ago.

He knows he can't for a while. She's still healing.

She goes faster.

Ben yanks her hair.

To go slower.

She does so.

He holds her in the tiny hospital bed. She was sleeping but it doesn't stop him from running his fingers in her hair. He loves her, this strong girl. His girl.

The baby is crying.

Ben breaks away and positions her up. This wakes her and she instinctively pulls her shirt a little bit as he brought the baby to her.

This moment, watching her feed their son was intimate.

It would have been better if they were at home.

When they get home, they stay the whole day in the basement.

He holds his son securely in his arms and wonders if he ever did go with the plan of a home delivery if he would made Rey give birth in a tub or in a plastic pool.

"I still can't believe he's finally here," she says in disbelief.

"I know," he responded in agreement. He kissed his son's head. It would have been better if he delivered his son. It would have just been them and in the comfort of their home. They could have had more privacy. Maybe it would have been better if no one knew of his girl and his son.

But it was too late now.

The second the baby fell asleep, Ben puts him in the crib and scoops Rey in his arms. "Thank you," he tells her for the hundredth time.

She doesn't respond to his words.

But he can tell she was pleased.

He kisses her. Squeezes her. Touches her.

Ben was very sweet with the baby. This is something that Rey notices. He was more paternal than she was maternal. She's trying her best to take care of the baby, but she was still young. She didn't know what to do.

He was older, she reminded herself.

She wasn't even an adult yet.

She doesn't even have a driver's license yet. Or maybe ever at this point.

It amazes her, how Ben was with the baby. She couldn't help but to find it cute. He plays guitar and sings for the baby and holds the baby while he types reports on his laptop. But of course, the baby was his son.

When he was with the baby he's so… normal.

She doesn't understand any of this.

To this day she doesn't understand why he kidnapped her.

"Have you ever tried kidnapping other girls before?" she asked him out of nowhere.

Ben looked at her and blinked. They had this conversation countless of times. "No," he said calmly as he put the baby in the crib. The baby was still awake but Ben goes to her. Hovers her.

"Did you ever want to?" she asked.

The baby was awake and was crying.

But no one goes to tend to him.

They had this conversation countless of times and yet every time she asked the more the conversation became intense.

"No," his voice was firm.

Rey's skin tightened. "Why did you kidnap me then?" She doesn't understand any of this. He works for the FBI — he has no criminal record — he was well off —

The baby was crying louder.

They both ignored the baby and stared at each other.

She knows his answer. He wanted to take care of her. "You could have approached me the normal way."

"I know I could have," he nodded.

“Why —

Rey blinked. He never says that. He always responds in saying that he wanted to take care of her. There was something off with the tone in his voice. It wasn’t a regretful tone but a matter of fact. There was something disturbing about his answer. “Then why did you kidnap me?” her heart was beating as he went closer to her.

The baby was screaming.

“I wanted to,” he whispered to her.

“What?”

“There’s something about you that makes me want to do bad things to you. Kidnap you. Chain you. Get you pregnant.” He grips her by the waist and kept his focus on her. He pushes her down to the ground and goes on top of her. “I know it scares you,” he murmured.

She can hear it, their son crying in desperation.

“The baby will be alright,” he reassures her, tightening his grip on her wrists.

She nodded and kissed him. And kept kissing him. “You don’t mean it,” she tells him. He doesn’t. He doesn’t. She keeps kissing him.

He’s taking off her clothes ignoring the sound of their child.

She’s kissing him harder. “You don’t mean it. You don’t.”

15. What Happened to Benny?

Joss noticed something was off from the start. It took Max and Greg three days of Benny being gone from school and being unresponsive to their texts to realize something was wrong. Benny always responded to texts and whenever Benny was sick he would always tell them.

Benny hasn't been at school for a week.

And this scared Joss.

"We should stop by his house," she tells the boys.

Greg and Max looked at one another. "I don't think we should go unannounced."

Joss frowned. "It's been a week!" she bit her lip. "We should have stopped by sooner," she muttered, yanking them by their ears.

"Benny's probably really sick," Max said.

"Yeah," Greg agreed. "Besides it's Benny. Nothing bad ever happens to Benny. You're overreacting. You're acting like Benny's been kidnapped or something."

Joss ignored the boys and dragged them to get on their bikes.

The three kids biked to Benny's house.

She sees both cars in the driveway. The sight comforts her. She hopped off her bike and ran to the doorbell.

"Wait Joss!" Max called out. "Slow down!"

She ignored him and kept running to the door. It was only a week but it felt like it was so much longer — felt like a year almost that she had

seen Benny. She rang the doorbell three times. “Hello Mr. Solo,” she greeted him, trying to contain her excitement.

Mr. Solo smiled softly. “Hello. I’m assuming you guys are looking for Benny,” he chuckled.

The trio nodded.

“I’m sorry to tell you but Benny’s not home right now.”

Joss’ heart sank. “Where has he been? Has he been sick?”

Mr. Solo shook his head. “No he and Mrs. Solo are on a little vacation right now.”

Max’s eyebrow raised. “Vacation? But it’s not even school break —

“Yeah and he would have said something,” Greg said.

“It was sudden but his grandmother’s health has been declining recently. So right now they’re taking her out to enjoy the little things.”

The children looked at Mr. Solo with confusion. Benny never mentioned about going away with his mom and grandma. But they didn’t question Mr. Solo. “When is he coming back?” they all asked in unison.

“Soon,” he reassured them. “He’ll be back home before you know it.”

The kids thanked Mr. Solo for his time before they headed out.

The kids biked to their favorite diner.

“There’s something off,” Max commented as he took a bite of his burger. “Something’s not right.”

“Yeah Benny would have texted us,” Greg agreed as he put ketchup on his fries.

“What are you guys thinking?” Joss raised her eyebrow.

“I don’t know what to think but I know something’s not right,” Max explained. “First of all Benny is one of our closest friends. He tells us everything and he never said anything about his grandma being really sick. And he never ignores a phone call or message either. I feel like something bad is happening and Mr. Solo doesn’t want to tell us.”

“Well, can you blame him? We are just kids. He doesn’t want us to worry,” Joss defended.

Greg took a sip of his milkshake. “You’re probably right, Joss. It’s adult logic. They think we can’t handle the truth and try to sugar coat everything. Maybe Mr. and Mrs. Solo got into a fight and so she and Benny are away.”

Joss laughed. “Come on, even you can’t believe that.” Mr. and Mrs. Solo were like perfect. They were in love. They were the parents that every kid wanted to have. Mr. Solo was handsome as Mrs. Solo was beautiful and they were both understanding and nurturing. Mr. Solo was the dad that she never had. He’s always been there for her whenever her mother was being a mess.

“Well something isn’t right.”

Another week goes by. And then another until a month had passed since the kids had last seen Benny. Benny had become the main talk in school. What happened to Benny? That was all the kids could talk about. No one had heard from Benny that a lot of kids thought he was a ghost.

Joss had turned thirteen today. She was the oldest in the group, the first to turn thirteen.

But it was hard for her to enjoy her birthday. It was the first birthday that Benny wasn’t there. It didn’t feel real.

The whole day yesterday she kept checking her phone, hoping he would text her happy birthday but he didn’t. She wasn’t upset about it but saddened and worried. She wondered if he was alright — if he was

doing fine. This wasn't like him. Because the Benny she knew would have called her up to wish her a happy birthday. But maybe, they didn't know Benny that well like they thought.

Max and Greg tried their best to give her a good birthday — to keep her distracted but Benny was on her mind.

It was late. She should be sleeping but instead she was just laying in her bed, staring at her clock. It was eleven. But it was still the weekend so she could sleep in regardless, she reminded herself.

She was still in regular clothes but she wasn't in the mood to change into pajamas. She was in a dress — it was as simple dress. It was pink and chiffon with thin little straps. The boys took her out to a rose garden today to celebrate her birthday today and then took her to dinner. Her mom curled her hair today and let her put on blush and mascara and lip gloss too. Her mom worked the whole day but was going to take her out to celebrate tomorrow. Thirteen was an important age for a girl, her mom said.

She shut her eyes and sighed.

In the middle of the night, Joss wakes up to the sound of tapping.

At first she ignored it. It was probably a tree branch, she thought. But then the sound became louder and louder.

She snatched her phone and used it as a flashlight to navigate in the dark.

There's a figure, a familiar figure opening her window. And entering.

Benny.

Joss blinked. "Benny?" she gasped.

He pressed his finger against his lips, "Shh. We don't want to wake up your mom." He's looking around the room. He seemed tense but calm all

at once.

“I’m not sure if I should hug you or hit you!” she whispered. “Where have you been — why haven’t you been texting us?”

“It’s a long story,” his voice was faint.

Joss clutched on to her phone, the only light source. He seemed different. He looks like Benny and dresses like Benny but he looks more mature. It’s been a month that she had seen him but it was more than that. He looks more like his dad.

“It doesn’t matter,” he explained, giving her a small smile. “I just had to see you and tell you happy birthday.”

Joss hit him on the shoulder. “You could have called me like a normal person and not be a creep!” she muttered. “Who breaks into someone’s house? If your parents knew you were doing this they will give you hell.” Joss knows damn well that his parents don’t know where he’s at right now. It was late at night and they weren’t little kids anymore.

“I’m sorry — it’s just a lot of things have been happening. I just had to see you and this is the only time I can.” He gave her a hug. She doesn’t continue the argument and held him tight.

“I really missed you,” she breathed. She meant it, every single word. “When are you coming back?”

“I don’t know just yet — but soon. It’s just a lot of things happening with my grandma,” he explained.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” she demanded.

“Sometimes there’s some things that we want to keep to ourselves so we can process it first.”

“We miss you — we miss you so much. We get that you’re going through something but shoot us a text once in a while.”

Benny nodded. “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

“The whole school thinks you’re dead.”

Benny laughed. “You probably want me dead for being so missing in action, huh?”

“No shit,” she rolled her eyes. But she hugs him again, it felt like forever since she had seen him.

“How was your birthday?” he asked her. “Did you have a good day?”

She scoffed. “How can I have a good day when one of my best friends wasn’t there?”

“Did the guys do something right for once and give you a good birthday?”

“They did — they took me out to a garden and we had dinner — but it was just really hard to enjoy it.”

He bit his lip and sighed. “I’m sorry. A lot has been going on — you look pretty.”

She knew she was a mess. She knew well that her mascara was smudged and her hair was a mess. She wanted to laugh and call him stupid but she found herself blushing.

“I really missed you.”

“I missed you too,” she pulled her eyes from him. For some reason she couldn’t look at his face. She suddenly felt embarrassed. She didn’t understand why.

“Joss,” he calls her. “Look at me.”

She lifts her head but barely makes eye contact. She tries to remain calm and collected. She wonders if he notices.

He chuckled. “What’s wrong with you? Why are you acting so weird?”

“It’s nothing,” she said defensively. The truth is, she doesn’t know why she’s acting so weird. This was Benny, one of her best friends. They

always been friends since forever. She moved away from him and walked around. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh really?” he teased. “You barely looking at me is nothing?”

“Yes,” she said as she sat down on her bed. She placed her phone next to her alarm clock, faces it so the screen side so the flashlight was still out. “It’s just you know it’s super dark and looking at you with this kind of lighting is creepy,” she explained. “Like evil.”

“Joss,” he called out her name again, sitting beside her.

“What —

He presses his lips against hers.

She pulled away in shock. She blinked several times. Growing up, everyone — always told her that her first kiss would be with Benny. Adults. Classmates. Even her mom. Every time they told her that she would wrinkle her nose. Benny was her best friend. She never saw him that way. This was the boy that used to have sleepovers with her and the boy that she spent most of her holidays with. They never saw each other as anything but friends.

This — this very moment was still a surprise for her even after all those years of everyone telling her that they would end up together one way or another. She blinked, wondering when did this happen? What events lead to this? When did he start being into this kind of stuff? The Benny she knew wasn’t interested in girls or dating or any of this.

He leaned to kiss her again. She found herself leaning closer. He kisses her very innocently. It was just a peck on her mouth.

“That — that was my first kiss,” she explained.

“It was mine too,” he comforted her.

He seemed so calm about it while she was blushing like crazy. “Did you always like me?” she asked.

“No —

“Then when?”

He presses his lips again and kisses her gently. She kisses him back this time — clumsily. She missed his mouth. He stroked her cheek softly. She blushed harder. He seemed to know way more than she did. She was older too but he was much better in this type of thing. “I don’t want to talk right now — I just want to kiss you. I don’t know when I’m going to come back.”

“How long did you want to kiss me?”

“Ever since I was gone,” he touched her hair. “Shh, I’ll explain later — I don’t have much time.” He kisses her again and again, each time deepening the kiss.

There was so many questions that she wanted to ask but she nodded. The light from her phone was dim but she could still see him. She kept kissing him back, each time she gotten better.

They kept kissing each other, giving each other light kisses. The more they kissed, the more she grew to like kissing. It felt weird at first but she was getting comfortable with it. She’s happy at least that her first kiss was with someone she was close with. This was Benny, her best friend. It felt right. He knows her the best. He was the nicest boy that she knew. They were laying on her bed now, cuddling and kissing. She couldn’t help but to feel giddy. It just felt right. Natural almost.

“What are you doing?” she asked, pushing his hand away from the strap of her dress. She’s not dumb. She knows what he’s trying to do and it’s just something that catches her off guard. She knows from all the health classes talk that they are at ’that age’ but she didn’t expect it to be so soon or from Benny of all people.

“Do you trust me?” he asked.

“Yes,” she doesn’t even take to think it. She trusts him. She trusts him more than anyone.

“It’s going to be okay,” he assured her.

She swallowed hard. “Okay.”

They were only twelve and thirteen, she never thought that they would have sex. Especially this young. Do people even have sex this young? Biologically, Joss knew she wasn’t too young. She had gotten her period since she was eleven — but most people have sex for the first time when they were sixteen. She didn’t know what to think. She could barely register the fact that they did. It was awkward and it hurt — it really hurt. They both didn’t know what they were doing and so they followed their instincts. It went well for the most part, she thinks. They were still in her bed, naked with only the blanket covering them.

He was holding her.

“Are you still?” she asks, blushing. They kind of did it twice. They both came fast the first time and then got the hang of it the second time.

“No,” he gives her a soft kiss on her neck.

She pulls him up to kiss him. She still can’t believe they did it. She couldn’t help but to laugh.

“It was awkward,” he laughed as well.

“Yeah it was,” she kisses him again. And this comforts her, them laughing together. It feels so natural.

“It felt good though,” he says, pulling her closer to kiss her more. Benny kisses her for a long time before pulling away. “I’m sorry but I need to go.”

It was almost morning.

He puts on his clothes. “You have some bruises here — and there,” he pointed out as he helped her into her clothes.

“When are you coming back?” she asks him as he headed out the window.

“I really don’t know.”

16. Numb

At first, Joss thought it was a dream. It must have been a dream, Joss told herself. It didn't feel real — Benny sneaking into her room after all this time — and them, and them having sex. It didn't feel real. It felt like a bad dream. But she sees it — the stains on her bed sheets, the evidence of her blood and their cum. Her bed sheets were dark and wasn't as noticeable but she knew what it was. They had sex. She still couldn't believe that they did. Blood pumped to her cheeks at the sight of the stains. And she feels slight pain — it isn't a lot of pain or anything, it's just a stinging pain but it was something.

She knew what sex was. She knew it from health class and all the times she walked in on her mom — but vaguely. She knew the general part of it but didn't know much details about it. Like she knew that the male's… part goes inside but she didn't know that there was so much touching involved. Benny knew much more than her that was for sure.

He seemed different.

Changed.

It was awkward but mom says it was always awkward the first time with anyone. But he didn't seem as embarrassed or awkward about it the way she was freaking out practically the whole time. A part of what happened feels like a horror story — she lost her virginity on her thirteenth birthday. It just happened only a few hours ago but she remembers it clearly.

"I didn't think you were into this kind of stuff just yet," she blushed, trying to avoid his gaze. He's touching her up slowly. His face is tinted pink, a stark contrast to her red splotched face.

"Into what?" he asked.

He knows, she knew. He was just giving her a hard time. "Don't be an ass," she shivered. They're covered in a blanket but she still felt cold. "You know what I mean." Into girls. Into kissing. Into sex.

"I mean, yeah," he laughed. "Like since last year."

"Last year?" She couldn't help but to be surprised.

"No offense Joss but it's not exactly something me and the guys want to talk about with a girl."

"Oh." Mom said that boys matured slower than girls and so Joss assumed her friends wouldn't be into that stuff into much later.

"I'm pretty sure there are things you don't feel comfortable telling the guys," he countered. "It's only natural."

She knows for certain that she doesn't want to tell the guys about this.

He moved his hands to her throat before proceeding to kiss her there.

Her eyes flickered as she stared at the phone. She decides to text him. She knows that he probably wouldn't respond from the pattern of the past month but she still texts him. She wants to talk to someone about it and Benny was the only person she could talk to.

I can't believe it happened.

That was all she put.

It was vague just in case anyone read their messages. He didn't tell her anything that was going on with him but she could tell by the way he was acting last night that everything had to be kept in secrecy.

Mom's knocking on the door. "Joss wake up honey. Get ready so we can start your birthday celebration."

"Okay Mom," she called out.

Joss rushed to the bathroom and locked the door. She turned on the water but didn't jump in right away. She took off her clothes and inspected herself in the mirror first. There are bruises all over her chest but at least she could cover them easily with a shirt. Other than that, she looked fine.

She just doesn't know why she's taking this so seriously.

Maybe it's the fact that it happened all so fast — that they went this far in one night together. Or that they did all that stuff even though they weren't even dating. Like boys were suppose to try to hold the girl's hand first before kissing.

She wiped her eyes.

She doesn't even know if she did like him or not. It happened so fast — one moment she never thought of ever seeing him that way and then that changed. In an instant. Even if her mom did walked in on them, her mom wouldn't have believed it still. Even if Joss told her mom, she knew what her mom would think — that the kids weren't capable of doing such a thing.

Something had changed in Joss, Max noticed.

She was distant.

She's been different.

Max and Greg didn't know why. They would constantly ask her what was wrong but she would deny and tell them it was nothing. But they knew something wasn't quite right. It had only been a few days since her thirteenth birthday and they noticed a drastic change with her.

"Joss, are you alright?" Max asked.

School had just ended. They usually walked home together until parted ways but today she didn't wait for them. Max was following her, trying to catch up to her pace.

“Yeah, of course,” she put on a smile.

Max and Greg saw right through it.

“Why wouldn’t I be okay?” she laughed. It was a hallow laugh.

Greg shrugged. “You haven’t seem okay since your birthday — is it because of Benny?”

Joss flinched. “Why do you say that? Why do you think it’s because of Benny?”

The boys were stunned. She seemed so defensive.

“It’s not because of Benny,” she snapped. “He hasn’t been here for a while.”

“It’s okay,” Greg said. “We all miss him.”

“Well I don’t,” Joss’s voice was hard.

“You don’t mean that,” Max said. “What’s going on? You can tell us, we’re your friends.” Max put his hand on her shoulder.

Joss slapped him away.

Max and Greg both blinked.

“I’m sorry,” she mumbled. “I just don’t know — I don’t know what came over me.”

Laurel had noticed a change in her daughter Joss.

Joss was quieter and seemed disconnected to everything.

She barely ate dinner and hadn’t been spending time with her friends for almost a week. Instead Joss would come home and lock herself in her room.

This wasn’t like Joss.

And it scared Laurel.

But Laurel knew what was going on. No one had seen Benny or Mrs. Solo for over a month. It was almost as if they had vanished. Everyone in town was talking about it. Speculating. Questioning. Reevaluating everything about the Solos.

The adults would see Mr. Solo from time to time in passing. They would run into him picking up food, at the grocery store, or at the gas station. It wasn't anything out of the ordinary but the fact that no one knew what happened to Benny or his mother was unnerving. Something was not quite right. Other parents would talk about how they saw a police car in front of Mr. Solo's house from time to time.

And with that came speculations.

Some adults think that Rey was unhappy with the marriage and took off with Benny while some adults think that the Solos were involved with money laundering or drug possession.

All three theories seem plausible but it didn't seem right to Laurel.

She knew the Solos. They were always good to her daughter and looked after Joss when Laurel was struggling. The Solos helped Laurel stop drinking and they gave her daughter a safe environment whenever Laurel couldn't.

She knows that children could be just as cruel as the adults. She knows that children talk and that Joss and her friends were dealing with being bullied at school regarding their friend. Joss never said anything about it but Laurel knew. Laurel couldn't imagine how hard it was to hear horrible rumors about her friend while not exactly knowing what was going on.

It was affecting her daughter.

Laurel didn't know what to do. She's not sure if she should continue to give her daughter space or to finally talk to her about it. But tonight she decides to talk to Joss.

She doesn't knock on the door. She just enters and finds Joss in her bed. Joss was crying.

Laurel skips the small talk. "It's okay," she assured her daughter. "It's okay to miss him."

Joss sat up and wiped her eyes. "I don't miss him."

"Then why are you crying?"

Joss shrugged. "I don't know."

"I taught you that there's nothing wrong with crying," she reminded her daughter. "Benny means a lot to you and it's perfectly okay to cry. You and your friends are going through a tough time, and it's perfectly natural." Laurel sat beside her daughter and wiped her stained cheeks.

"Mom," Joss heaved.

"Yes?"

"Do you think Benny's a good person?"

"Of course he is. He is a good boy. Don't let what people say get to you."

"Then why isn't he talking to me? Or Max or Greg?"

Laurel bit her lip. "I don't know honey. But trust me, Benny is a good boy."

Benny was a good boy. This Laurel knew for sure. She doesn't know what's going happening with the Solos but she knew Benny was a good boy. Out of all the boys her daughter was friends with, Benny was Laurel's favorite. Benny was calm and polite and was the most sensitive with her daughter. Laurel knew since day one that Benny was going to be the boy that her daughter ended up with.

Laurel still feels it.

It was late at night but Laurel was unable to sleep.

A random memory kept looming in her mind, pressing her to stay awake.

It was so random but she doesn't know why it's coming to mind.

It was years ago. Both Joss and Benny were four years old. At that time, Laurel was still getting to know Rey and so they had play dates. Their children got along right on the spot but both parents wanted to get to know one another. They would rotate. This week it was Rey's turn to have the play date at her home. (Before them getting to this they would have play dates in public areas like the park, bookstore, and the library for about a month.)

Laurel and Rey sat down on the couch and ate lunch while their children were busy playing house.

The hardest part was to end every play date. The children loved playing with each other and always pleaded for more time.

"I hate this part," Laurel sighed.

Rey laughed. "I hate this part too but good thing it's your turn to be the barrier of bad news."

Laurel chuckled. "Joss," she called out for her daughter.

Joss didn't hear. Joss was too absorbed in playing with Benny.

"Joss," Laurel called out her name again. "It's time to go home."

Joss looked up and frowned. "No mommy! Please five more minutes!" she pleaded.

Laurel shook her head. "I gave you five minutes already." And that five minutes was actually twenty minutes.

Benny frowned, shaking his head. Laurel couldn't help but to admire the boy's curls. "No," he pouted. "I want Joss to stay," he hugged Joss tightly then.

“Please mommy, can I please stay?” Joss whined, hugging him tightly as well.

Both the moms couldn’t help but to find it cute. “You’ll see her next week,” Rey coaxed her son.

“No, please mommy!” Benny frowned. He let go of Joss and ran to the door. He locked the door then. “I want to keep her here.”

Laurel laughed but to her surprise Rey didn’t have a sense of humor with her son’s gesture. Rey seemed upset. She went up to her son and went on one knee to be eye level with him. “Unlock the door now,” her tone was stern. “You can’t keep her here. She’s not yours to keep. She’s a person, you don’t own her Ben,” Rey paused to blink. “Benny,” she pursed her lips.

“Please mommy?” Benny pouted. “We can keep her in our safe place.”

Rey’s frown deepened, her face getting hot. “If you don’t unlock the door now, you’re not going to play with her anymore. Do you understand?”

Benny immediately unlocked the door.

“Good, now apologize.”

“Sorry,” Benny sniffed.

Rey stood up and put Benny in her arms. “I’m sorry, Laurel. I’m sorry for my son’s behavior.”

“It’s perfectly fine,” Laurel laughed. “He just loves spending time with my daughter.”

17. Ben Solo Junior

“Mommy,” Benny called out for her.

“Yes?” she answered back, chuckling. She lifted the little boy in her arms and ran her fingers through his curls. They were in the garden. She was gardening while Benny was playing with the flowers and sprouts.

“Why am I named Ben?” he asked.

“You are named after your daddy,” she smiled.

Benny blinked in astonishment. “Daddy’s name is Ben?”

Rey pressed her lips, pressing her laughter. “Of course it is. He is Ben Solo and you are Ben Solo Junior.”

The boy blinked at her. “Why am I named after daddy? Are all boys named after their daddies?”

“Not all but it is common,” she explained.

“Why am I named after daddy?”

“Because you take so much after your father,” she awed. “Hair and all,” she kissed her son. “Your father is a good man. We gave you the name to someday grow into it — to some day become just like daddy. You are Ben Solo Junior.”

This was one of Benny’s oldest memories, the earliest memory he could remember. Never did he imagine that this memory would haunt him and keep him up all night. He hasn’t been able to have a full night’s rest since the start of the investigation on his family.

Benny knows it was mainly an investigation on his father. His dad was never one hundred percent honest about it to Benny but Benny knew. He was young but he was able to pick up on things. Benny was

only allowed to visit his dad once a week for two hours at a time under supervision.

The police were taking a much longer time since the case involved a child and a mother who was then a minor at the time of the incident. His dad was only granted visits because of his work background and clean history.

It's been a little over a month but Dad was still not granted visits or any sort of contact with Mom.

The law was always careful and thorough with cases that involved minors and domestic abuse.

Benny was allowed to visit his mother once a week as well but under the same requirements. Only for two hours at a time. Under supervision.

Being away from his family and waiting for his father to be cleared was draining him more and more with each passing day. The adults involved with the case weren't exactly informative on what was happening or why his dad was being investigated but Benny knew it must be a serious claim for their family to be separated.

Benny doesn't believe his dad is guilty for whatever he's accused of. His dad was a good man and was a good father and husband — Benny was Ben Solo Junior.

Every visit, his dad would give Benny twenty dollars. Twenty dollars for allowance, Benny would always explain to the social worker that monitored the visits. The social worker would never question it.

If only the workers knew what Benny did with the money.

He used the money to pay for all the secret bus and cab rides that Benny took at night when he was suppose to be asleep in his room at his foster parents' home. It wasn't just his mom and dad that was being investigated, it was also his entire family. His temporary foster parents

lived in the next city over — if only they knew where Benny was at night.

He would visit his dad in the night. That was when they were able to talk without being watched or recorded.

“I want to see mom more,” Benny would always beg. Benny knew the answer but he would always ask, hoping the answer would change.

Dad shook his head and sighed. “Where mom is at, there’s so many security cameras.”

His heart dropped. “Why won’t they let me see mom more?”

“Benny you already know the answer,” Dad exhaled.

“No. No I don’t,” Benny shook his head. His eyes were starting to burn.

“Benny, don’t talk to your father like that,” his voice was firm.

“Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” Benny raised his voice. He was frustrated from being kept in the dark about everything. “Why am I not staying with grandma and grandpa during all of this?” he shouted louder. “Why am I staying with strangers? Why can’t I go to school? Why can’t I come home?”

“I know you’re upset but lashing out isn’t going to help anyone.”

Benny wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

Dad wrapped his arms around Benny and held him tight. “I know you’re frustrated. I know you’re scared. But it’s okay to feel this way.”

“I’m so tired,” Benny shook his head. He was. He was so tired. It was more than just the foster parents. It was getting used to being homeschooled and not being able to breathe — to have time alone from adults. When he wasn’t at his foster parents’ home -Benny had therapy sessions, check ups from doctors, and was constantly questioned by the investigators and other workers involved.

“I’m tired too. And I miss her too,” Dad kissed his head. “You’re not alone with this,” he reminded his son. “At least you have more freedom than I do.”

His dad was not allowed to leave town. Dad would never say it but Benny knew by the ankle bracelet.

Benny was suppose to use his money to visit dad. But he didn’t. He used his money to visit Joss again.

He wanted to see her sooner but so many things got in the way.

He wanted to respond to her messages — he wanted to call her on the phone — but dad told him not to use his phone until all of this was over. And Benny knew well. He knows that the police were tracking all of the family’s phones. So whenever Benny went to visit, he always left his phone in his foster parents’ home.

Dad wants to give Benny a burner phone but Dad doesn’t trust Benny with that type of responsibility especially with all the random searches.

But it killed Benny, to see all the messages and not be able to respond. He wants to answer and tell them that he’s okay but he knows that he might slip and say too much.

He goes to her.

He isn’t scared this time climbing up to her room. He just wanted to see her — to make sure she was okay. To his surprise he finds her window open — as if she had left it open for him. But he still knocks on her window. “Joss,” he called out for her.

It was dark.

And silent.

“Joss,” he calls her name again.

She wakes up this time. “Benny?” she yawned, reaching for her phone. She puts her phone to flashlight mode once again.

He doesn’t hesitate to go inside her room. He runs to hug her — to hold her. “How are you feeling? Are you okay?” he asked.

“I’m fine,” she insisted, pulling away from him.

He blinked. They were only two steps away but he felt a distance from her and him. “What’s wrong?” he asked, he reaches to put his hands on her shoulders. To his surprise, she’s shrugging him away.

“Why are you here?” she demanded.

“I —

“So you can use me again?” her tone was cold.

He raised his eyebrow. “What? Joss what are you talking about —

“You’re only here to have sex —

“I’m not,” he emphasized. “I wanted to see if you were okay. I wanted to see you.”

“You don’t even like me — why did we even have —

“Stop,” he grabbed her again. “Joss stop it —

She hit him. “I hate you,” she sobbed quietly.

“Well I don’t.”

Joss didn’t respond.

“I wanted to see you as soon as possible,” Benny went on weakly. “I couldn’t. Life’s been hell —

“So what? You use me to make yourself feel better?”

“I didn’t plan for that to happen. I wanted to see you on your birthday. It just happened. Joss I wasn’t here to use you — do you honestly think I was using you?”

“We shouldn’t have done it,” she breathed. “I wasn’t ready — it’s been messing with my head.”

“I’m sorry that it happened — I’m sorry that I wasn’t there right away. But I’m here right now.”

“We had sex so early — I don’t know what we’re suppose to do from that. Are we suppose to be friends still? Are we suppose to be —

He kisses her then. “I like you Joss —

“Since when?”

Benny laughed. “Can you let me talk without being interrupted for one second?”

She exhaled.

“I feel like I always liked you but I didn’t know that I did. Can you blame me? We were little kids just growing up —

“We’re still kids,” she reminded him. “We shouldn’t have had sex so early,” she repeated again.

“I’m sorry that we did but we can’t take it back. It happened but we don’t have to have sex again until the time is right.”

“Okay but are we suppose to be until then?”

“Well it’s up to you really.”

“I think you have a say too,” she couldn’t help but to laugh.

“Hey I managed to get you to laugh —

“Stop it,” she warned.

“I really don’t care what we are Joss. I just want you to not hate my guts,” he laughed. “I don’t mind waiting when we got —

“Don’t say forever,” she warned. She doesn’t believe in forever. She never did after all the times she saw her mom being promised it by so many men and being let down. Joss spent so many years growing up

watching her mom drink her sadness away. And Joss doesn't want to do that.

"I won't," he was serious then. He knows that the word was a sensitive topic for her. "But I know I do want to be with you. Always."

"I know a lot of our classmates are dating and saying that stuff but you can't promise that. We're in middle school. It means nothing. It's just hopeful wishing." Joss knew. Her mom constantly gave her the talk that having a relationship when you were still young rarely lasted.

He squeezes her then, squeezes her by the hand. "No. I mean it."

"You don't," she laughed.

"Do you remember when we were little? Remember how I used to always get in trouble for telling you that I wanted to keep you?"

Joss nodded and laughed. It was the only time and reason Benny would get time outs. "I still don't know why it makes your mom so mad whenever you say it. She made us stop playing house too."

"I still feel it."

"Feel what?"

"I just want to keep you."

She couldn't help but to blush. He told her that so many times growing up but this time it sounded so different.

"I know you're upset that we -," he paused. "You know… but I'm happy that we did it early."

"Why?"

"No one else got to touch you yet. I don't mind waiting for you. Honestly I don't. Even if it's years until you're ready. Joss I really, really like you. But you have to promise me something."

"What is it?"

“Don’t let anyone touch you but me.”

18. Jocelyn

There was a long time ago where everybody called her Jocelyn.

But then that changed when she met Benny.

And from that moment everyone called her Joss.

Max thinks about this from time to time — how one little thing can have so much impact. He's noticed a change in his friend. Everyone did. She was older yes, but she seemed older. He can't quite explain it but he sees it, the sudden disconnect that she had to everything their small group of friends loved. She was disinterested in all of their favorite things, activities, shows.

And she dresses different. More girly. She looks older.

Max and Greg felt they didn't know her anymore.

It hurts Max to find out that their friendship wasn't equal — that she was closer to Benny. And it showed. She's not the same since Benny's not around. It was stupid to think for the longest time that everyone was equally close to one another.

"Max, come on. You can't be that blind," Greg blinked. "Joss and Benny are close."

"I thought we were all best friends," Max admitted. He feels stupid for saying the words but it was true.

"We are but they are closer to each other."

"I can't stand seeing her like this. I feel like she's going to hurt herself."

"We just got to continue to be there for her but there's not much we can do. We're not Benny."

“Where do you go when you’re not here?” Ben asked his son.

Benny blinked emotionlessly. “What do you mean?”

Ben crossed his arms and frowned. Ben saw right through his son’s poker face. “You know what I mean.”

It was in the middle of the night. The only time they were able to talk freely without being monitored.

“Some days I’m tired, Dad,” Benny explained. “I need some time to sleep. Besides visiting you — I have to make it appear that I’m there at my foster’s place. And I have homework and all these meetings and sessions. I’m just a kid,” he said weakly.

Ben’s skin tightened. His son looked so exhausted. So drained. How could Ben not see this? “I’m sorry. I didn’t know this was affecting you. I know what I’m asking is a lot but I love you and I miss you.”

“Don’t get me wrong I do want to see you whenever I get the chance but there’s some nights that I need to rest.”

The month had turned into two months.

But Benny was not honest with his father.

Benny doesn’t sleep. He goes to her. He climbs to her room and crawls to her bed. Crawls home to her.

That was the only time Benny could see her. That they could be together.

She was the only person he completely trusted. Besides his mother, he’s not sure if he could trust anyone in his family. Not his father. Not his grandfather. Not even his grandmother.

There was no way that this girl that Ben had brought home was twenty two, Leia thought. She couldn’t pull her eyes away from the girl. This girl looked so young. She was so petite and small beside Leia’s son.

Leia knew perfectly well that her son was a giant man but Leia could tell something was not right.

Leia set aside her thoughts and kept the smile on her face over dinner.

She waits until the next night, when she was able to speak to her son alone.

"How old is your girlfriend?" Leia asked.

"She's twenty two — I know she's a little on the young side but —

Leia frowned. "How old is she really?"

Ben remained unfazed. "Rey is twenty two."

Leia didn't believe him. "Is she at least eighteen?" she demanded, unable to hold her temper.

"Rey is twenty two," Ben said firmly.

"I don't believe you," she snapped at him.

"What do you want me to tell you?" he asked. "Rey is twenty two years old. Why do you have trouble believing that?"

"Ben, I am your mother. I know you. I know when you're lying. You can't be doing this — she's so young —

"There's nothing much you can do," his voice went hard. "She's pregnant with my child."

Leia flinched in horror. She had never heard her son speak in such a possessive tone. "Do you know for certain that she is pregnant with your child? How do you know if this girl isn't just after your money?"

"Rey isn't like that. She is a good girl. She was a virgin before me. Do you want me to tell you how I know that? How she bled on my —

"Stop," Leia yelled. She felt disgusted in how he was speaking. "How old is this girl?"

“She’s twenty two,” he remained consistent with his answer. He continued on with the story he painted from last night. Leia knew the story was a lie by how fabricated it was.

Leia’s skin tightened. His responses sounded so perfect and rehearsed. She took a step back. “Ben — what did you do this girl?”

Benny and Joss always spend an hour kissing first before speaking. They would kiss underneath her covers. It was innocent kissing, only little kisses. Soft kisses. They didn’t plan on having sex again until they were ready. They would cuddle and play with each other’s hair. It was more playing than anything. It was more comfort than anything. It was more than what friends do.

It felt natural to them now. Second nature.

There was a long time ago where everyone called her Jocelyn.

But that changed when they met.

And after that moment she became Joss.

Benny thought she would always be Joss.

He didn’t know one day she would be his girl.

They’re laying in bed. She’s touching his cheek and running her fingers through his curls. She hopes he never cuts his curls. She had loved them for as long as she could remember. He smiles back at her, it’s a small smile but his eyes are bright. Joss couldn’t help but to beam as well because for a moment everything feels back to normal. But only for a moment. A brief moment.

Before she could kiss him again she watches his face fall. He’s crying now. Silently.

“What’s wrong?” she keeps her voice low. She hugs him then, holds him tight.

“I think my dad did something bad to my mom.”

19. Mrs. Solo

Rey had lost the baby.

The baby was gone for some time now but she was still trying to process it. How could she have lost the baby? The doctors explained to her of the complications that caused her to miscarry but Rey felt it was her stress that was the cause. How could she have lost the baby when she was able to carry Benny full term under worse conditions? In confinement. When she was only a teenager.

Ben was this close to making her give birth in the basement too and she would have had to if he hadn't come to his senses.

They were cleared — for now. The investigation was only in the beginning stages but they were cleared to all be together again until further notice. Rey doesn't know for how long but she was going to live day by day like she used to. It was better that way, less stress and anxiety inducing than thinking on the grand scale of things. The boys were notified of her miscarriage but it didn't make her pain any easier.

This was the first pregnancy that she wanted.

A symbol of how far they've gone. A symbol of their love.

She knows that she and Ben can always try again but right now she was left numb.

"When you're ready, let me know," he tells her then, taking in her belongings inside. Benny was in the back, grabbing the rest of her things.

She knows that it wasn't good for her to get pregnant until the whole ordeal was done. They don't know when it will be over and so they live day by day. They were together again but it was different. Things have changed.

There was something different about her boys. Ben seemed more detached and Benny seemed so much like his father now.

“You should get some rest,” Benny says to her, giving her a hug.

When did he get so tall? She observed her son. He was almost as tall as Ben.

“Dad and I will make dinner.”

Rey shook her head. “No. I’m fine.”

“You’re not fine,” Ben said.

“I want to make dinner,” she stated.

“Stay inside,” Ben tells her then. It was blanketed as a statement but she knew it was an order.

“I am fine. I miss looking after my boys. Where are my keys?”

“Benny, go with your mother.”

“No. He has homework to do. I can go by myself.” This was the first time in months that she’s been back at home. She wants the freedom of going out without any supervision.

“Benny, get your jacket.”

“I’m fine.”

Ben flinched then. “Alright. Well make sure you have your phone on you and drive safely.”

She hadn’t driven in such a long time that it was terrifying. She was careful. She made sure she looked before changing lanes and signaled always. The grocery store was only two miles away but it felt so liberating to be able to go from point a to point b.

She hasn’t felt so alive since she learned how to drive. So many things had happened to her during the investigation but those things were for her to know. Not Ben. Not Benny. Just her. She can’t remember the last time she had something for herself. Her own space. The only thing her family needed to know was that for now they were cleared.

Rey did break during her time alone but she didn’t shatter. She told their truth, not her truth and she kept to the story no matter how many times she was questioned and put to the test. So many times she wanted to tell the people her truth but she didn’t. She kept to their truth.

Rey took her time in the store. She didn’t know exactly what she wanted to make. It had been such a long time since she cooked and she wanted to make the first meal all back together special. She roamed about while idly looking through recipes on pinterest. She could make crepes for dinner. Sweet ones. Savory ones. She could make chicken almondine. She could make chicken alfredo. So many options. She was going to be here for a while but she didn’t mind.

But then it changed when she noticed that people were looking at her. Looking at her as if she was a ghost. Perhaps she was. For what they knew about the Solos had changed and was gone. She smiled at them politely and carried on. She focused on the contents of each aisle. She was approached by a few people she knew from the PTA here and there, asking about where she had been and how she was doing.

Rey was careful with her words, she always was.

It was only protocol and I complied.

I stayed with my relatives.

She only falter when they stared at her flat stomach. Everyone knew she was pregnant and now everyone was going to know that the baby was gone. They were nosy but they were not heartless. They didn’t ask about what happened to the baby. She was thankful because she wasn’t sure if she was able to answer without crying.

“It’s nice to see you here. How are you doing?” another person approached her.

She looked up and painted a smile. She knew that voice, knew him very well. “I’m doing just fine,” she said calmly, watching his face twist slightly. “And how are you and your droid?”

“We’re doing fine,” he smiled back. He moved his cart back slightly, trying to use it as a buffer between them. “You look great. We’re hope you’re doing well, Rey.”

He was just like the others in this town, with an agenda hiding behind a façade. “It’s Mrs. Solo,” she corrected him. She wanted to move away from him but she couldn’t.

“Rey —

“Mrs. Solo.” He didn’t deserve to refer her by her name. Not after what he did.

“I know you hate me —

She ignored him. *You temporarily separated my family*, she wanted to tell him. *And I lost my baby during the last few months.* She walked past him and proceeded to shop. But he didn’t let her be. She sensed him following her. Lingering.

“I know you hate me,” Poe went on again, keeping his voice low. “But you needed it. You needed some time away. I believe the universe is good. I really do. And if the universe isn’t on the right side, it’s all in your hands, Rey.”

Rey winced and felt her eyes burned. “I don’t know what you are talking about.”

“Rey. You are Rey.” Poe gave her a small smile before parting ways.

His words keep her up at night. Every time he said her name — it did something to her. The way he said her name, there was something about it. As if she had forgotten her name for a long time and he was reminding her what it was — who she was. And the way he smiled at her, it was like he had faith in her in telling the truth. In freeing herself.

But she didn't want that.

She spent so many months being surveyed on her mental state, her sanity, her past, and whether or not she was a fit mother. She had just managed to go under the radar. She loves her family. She loves her son and her husband.

There was a time where she did want that— to be free but this was before Benny. And that was a long time ago. Poe was too late, thirteen years too late. She has a son to think about now and she loves her husband. She and Ben went through so much together and raised a beautiful son together as well. She can't forget on how good of a father Ben is to their son. So attentive. Nurturing.

"Ben," she called out his name. He was asleep, his arms wrapped around her waist. "Ben," she called out his name again.

He yawned and mumbled. "Hmm?"

"I want to go out for a drive."

Ben sat up then. "It's late, sweetheart."

"I can't sleep."

"We can't leave Benny by himself."

She sighed. He was right. "I miss being able to go out for drives together." They used to do that. Years back when Rey was adjusting to sleeping in the master bedroom opposed to the basement. He would take her out on late night drives to soothe her nerves. They would take Benny and buckle him up in his car seat. Benny would sleep through with ease as Ben drove his little family around.

“You know we can’t.” Benny was older and now was questioning things. He pulls her back to bed and holds her in his arms. She’s stiff in his hold. Ben felt his heart beat slowly. She wasn’t used to this anymore. She didn’t say it but he could tell by her body language. He kisses her then but it feels like years ago. When she pulled him away. When she was repulsed being touched by him. His eyes flickered. “I want to be inside of you, sweetheart,” he pleads.

“I’m not quite all there,” she shook her head. He’s nuzzling her neck but she couldn’t help but to tense up.

“I want to feel you,” he pleaded. He sounded like he was sobbing but he wasn’t. She felt no tears on her skin. He was close to her. Flesh to flesh. “I haven’t touched in you in such a long time. Please I want to be inside. I want to be in your warmth.”

She hesitated but then agrees to him. “Okay,” she whispers back.

He takes no time in taking off her clothes. He takes all of it off. This catches her off guard. She doesn’t know why he took off everything. And just like that his fingers are touching her there, in between her legs. His fingertips playing with her clit. He gets her wet, he always did. He knew how to make her wet. He locks them up in a kiss as he let his hands roam her body.

“Are you feeling good?” he asked.

“Yes. So good,” she purred into his ear. She misses him. She misses his touch.

“Good. I missed you so much sweetheart. I missed our little family but we’re all here again. It’s going to take some time for things to go back to normal but it will.” Before she knew it, he’s inside of her. She let a out moan. She forgotten how thick he was. God he was so big. He’s thrusting himself inside of her, trying to fit himself all the way in. He’s so big. How did he even fit in her to begin with? No wonder she got pregnant so fast. She didn’t stand a chance.

She wrapped her legs around his waist and he pressed himself deeper into her, angling her to be closer to him. She lets him consume her. Fuck her. She could barely move.

“I love you,” he panted. He dipped his head to suck her nipples. “I thought I wouldn’t see you again.”

She didn’t either. Honestly, she didn’t. She had been away for such a long time. “I love you Ben,” she does. She really does.

“Thank you for being such a good girl,” he quickened his pace. She was so tight there. Was she always this tight? “I know it was hard for you being by yourself with those people.”

“They were trying to trick me,” she nodded, pleased by his praise. She feels fifteen again, finally in good hands by a big man. “Ah — please be careful.” He was rough with her breast. “I’m so sensitive.”

He chuckled. “I can tell. You came on my dick a while ago but you’re such a good girl. You’re still wet for me even though you’re clearly tired.” He found her breast again and suckled on her nipple. He fucked her harder.

“Please be care-ful — please don’t —

He was quickening his pace, gripping her. “You feel so good.”

“Ben please don—

He came in her then, spirts of hot come filling her. He pressed his cock deeper inside her warmth, filling her with every drop of come he had.

She sighed. “Ben.” But she lets him finish filling her. He already came inside so she figured to let him finish. And it was a lot. He’s spilling on to the sheets.

“I’m sorry,” he said feebly. “But you like it.”

She did. She liked feeling his hot come inside her.

He pulled out of her then but her surprise he's dripping with come still and it was hitting her skin.

"I have to buy a Plan B pill tomorrow now," she sighed.

"You don't have to."

"Ben —

"Rey, please don't."

It took Leia a while to realize that her daughter in law did not have a driver's license. She knew that Rey didn't have a car but Leia assumed it was for finance reasons. Rey had a baby under one years old and was a stay at a home mother. It took months for Leia to put two and two together that Rey did not know how to drive. From time to time, Leia would watch the baby so the couple would have time together.

She would always go to their house to babysit for it was practical. All of the baby's essentials were there.

The times where the baby was brought to Leia was when Ben was there.

Leia had her suspicions and one day she stopped by randomly at their house to visit. Ben was at work and so it was just Rey and the baby. Leia convinced Rey for the three of them to go out shopping for a bit. Leia put the baby inside the car seat and purposely gave Rey the keys to start the car since Leia had her hands full. And just like she figured, Rey didn't know how to drive. Rey didn't even know how to start the car.

This was concerning.

Especially since Leia knew virtually nothing about the girl's past. Rey was a sweet girl but Leia wasn't all to sure if Ben was sweet to her. The girl seems to like her son but Leia wasn't all too sure. Ben had a history of having a short temper and this girl was also very young.

"When you get the chance, teach your girlfriend how to drive," Leia tells him. That was another thing, they weren't married either even though they had a baby. Everything about this was odd. "She needs to learn how to drive. It's important."

Ben doesn't deny the fact. His mother had already caught on to begin with. "She doesn't need to learn how to drive at this time. She has a four month year old baby to take care of."

"Yes but eventually the baby's going to grow up and it'll be convenient for the both of you for her to know how to drive. Eventually she needs to take him to school and go to stores and take him to practices. And I assume she's going to go back to work once he's in school."

"I don't have the time right now but as of now, everything's fine."

"What if there's an emergency?" Leia countered.

"There's always 911," he answered.

"You have the time to get a girl pregnant but not have time to help her?"

"Don't say it like that."

"Ben, I don't know the whole story with you guys but now you are responsible for her. She's young but you have to let her grow up. You're so protective of her."

"She's a real good girl, honestly she is."

"I know you're hesitant to give her freedom but she needs it. If you think she is really the one she's not going to leave."

"She's not going to leave me. She's not with me for my money. She loves me."

"Do you understand that driving is a privilege?" he asked Rey.

Rey looked up. She was in the process of swaddling the baby but he caught her attention. "Yes I do."

"Do you?" he asked again. His tone was stern. "If you want to drive, there are rules."

Rey nodded. She finished swaddling the baby and hugged their son close to her chest. Instinctively, the baby searched for her nipple to suckle on. "What are you trying to say."

Ben bit his lip and ran his fingers through his hair. "If you want to drive, there are rules you have to go by. One you must tell me where you are going at all times. Two you must message me to let me know you arrived at each destination. Three you must be careful. And four, you must not leave."

"I won't," she said earnestly.

"I'm giving you a lot of freedom if I let you drive, do you know that?"

Rey nodded. "I would love that. I want to be able to take the baby wherever I want without relying on you. I want to be more helpful —

"Don't leave."

"I won't," she promised. She could sense his pain. He wanted to give her a normal life but he doesn't trust her all together just yet.

"I will be taking my time with you in teaching you how to drive. Don't expect on getting your license right away."

Her eyes lit up then. "Really? Are you really going to teach me how to drive?"

"I really love you."

20. The Basement

Benny was finally back at home but things were not the same.

Dad was still under a mandatory vacation from work until things were sorted out. And Mom hasn't really left the house. Benny doesn't blame his mom because he could tell she's having a hard time adjusting. She's been hearing a lot of bad things about her and their family every time she goes out. It makes her feel unwelcomed and unwanted. Both Dad and Benny have to assure her that it was just petty gossip and that she shouldn't let it to get to her.

But that's easier said than done.

Benny's back at school again but he's not used to people looking at him all the time. They talk about him too and the kids are just like adults, dumb and thinking that no one else hears. His friends are different around him too. Joss especially. She's so nervous whenever they weren't alone, even with Greg and Max. He doesn't blame Joss though, they haven't exactly told their friends yet. Even though he and mom were back home, things weren't getting any easier.

Everyone's so fascinated with the Solo family. It's frightening. Benny and his parents just want time alone. Not only were they separated for months, Mom also had a miscarriage. But people aren't kind. People want to know, want to know every little detail.

Children are the most impressionable and being exposed to the adults reacting to them has Benny all messed up. It's been getting to his head because now he's starting to notice things. Like mom really, really looks young. Benny's never noticed this before. She really looks young, like she could be his older sister. It's not just that, just being at home again was making him think back of time away.

He still goes to therapy even though he's back home. They all do. They have to until everything was cleared. They all go to court mandated

therapy but separately. The legal system doesn't even trust them to have therapy sessions together to avoid rehearsed still gets questioned from the social workers and whoever's stopping by. It was really overwhelming. Benny's starting to bite at his nails when he's nervous. And he's been nervous for a while.

"Benny," Mom pulled his hand from his mouth. "Oh my god Benny! Stop it." She examined his fingertips, his nails were almost gone. His fingertips red and raw and calloused with layers of dead skin. "You're going to make yourself bleed."

"I'm sorry mom," Benny said sheepishly. He placed his hands at his sides and curled his fingers into fists to contain himself. If only mom knew that when he was away he would bite his nails even while his fingers were bleeding.

She grabbed her son by the wrist and took him to the bathroom to tend to his hands. She disinfected them and then put cream.

"I'm sorry mom, I'm just so nervous," he couldn't help but to cry.

Mom's face fell at the sight of her son crying. "Why are you nervous?"

"I don't know," he hiccupped.

Mom frowned. "It's okay sweetheart, it's perfectly normal. It's been stressful for us all but pretty soon this ordeal will be over. It will all be over." She wrapped his fingertips in bandages. "So you won't chew on them," she explained. "Why don't you go play the drums?" she suggested. It might help him with his stress, she thought. "You haven't played the drums in forever."

"That's true," he hiccupped again. It had been months since he was able to play.

Rey smiled. She tucked some of Benny's hair behind his ear. "I'll let you know once dinner is done."

Benny nodded and headed down to the basement.

Benny takes after his dad, a lot actually.

His dad is a musician and taught Benny everything he knows. His dad taught him first how to play guitar and then drums. *It gets the girls*, Dad would always tell him. So naturally Benny assumes that Dad got Mom with music.

Benny thinks about this as he practices. It felt good to play. It felt good to be as loud as he wanted without being observed or having to be quiet. He's humming the song *Buddy Holly.* It's the song that Dad and him always play and humming it comforts him. Humming makes the basement warm and not too big. He stopped playing then.

He couldn't help but to look around the place.

This place had always been the hangout spot for him and his friends. But right now his friends' parents aren't comfortable with letting their children hang out here until everything was settled. It baffled Ben because there was never any issues before. No one got hurt — he doesn't understand how one speculation can change everything. Parents don't trust his parents anymore.

Benny walked around and examined the room. There was nothing wrong with this place. It was roomy with ventilation and had pretty wallpaper. It never got hot for there was an AC. There was enough room for his instruments and a bookshelf and a TV and game consoles. This place was a kid's dream. A place of their own away from adults — there was even a small fridge and a bathroom with a shower and everything too —

Benny froze. Everything that he mentally listed seemed too convenient.

"Do you know why the basement is soundproofed?" his therapist asked him.

"Because I play the guitar and drums. Dad didn't want me to bother the neighbors so he had the basement soundproofed," Benny shrugged.

“What’s that got to do with anything?”

The therapist nodded.

Benny blinked in confusion as he watched his therapist write something down. “Is that weird or something?” Benny asked. He doesn’t think it’s odd. After all the drums can get loud.

“The basement seems to be an important part of your life.”

Benny laughed. He doesn’t get where the therapist was going with this. “Well yeah, me and my friends always went there to hang out. We played board games and video games and did homework there.”

“Does your mom spend a lot of time there too?”

Benny’s heart skipped a beat. “No — I mean only to do laundry but other than that no.”

“You hesitated,” his therapist said calmly.

“I just don’t understand the questions.” Benny said as he watched the therapist write something down again. Benny doesn’t know why but it makes him nervous. He did lie but he had to, it was his and Mom’s secret place. Benny knew well that the therapist will find it odd.

It was one of the things that Benny was constantly questioned about — the basement. About the contents of the basement. The layout. Asked about how often he and his mother spent there. But the main thing his therapist was perplexed about was it being soundproofed. It was odd to Benny because he already told his therapist the reason why. And somehow that wasn’t enough for his therapist.

“Do you know how long the basement has been soundproofed?” his therapist asked.

Benny thought for a while. He shifted in his seat as his eyes flickered at a memory pressing into his mind. A memory of him as a little boy — he must have been three or four and way too young to know how to play any instrument. He and mom were playing hide and seek and he thought

it was a good idea to hide in the basement. He was so small then but managed to close the door. He had picked a good place for his mom didn't find him right away like she always did. He tried to open the door but he wasn't strong enough to turn the knob open. Little Benny panicked and started crying for his mom, yelling as loud as he could as he banged on the door. But Mommy didn't hear. She didn't find him until what felt like hours to little Benny. In reality it must have been twenty minutes, Benny recalled his mother's frantic and spasm movements. And the sight of her relief once she had found him.

"Mommy!" he cried. "I called for you!" he sobbed harder into his mother's chest. "I called you forever!"

"I'm sorry I couldn't hear you," she hugged her son. "It's okay I'm here sweetheart. It's just we're not going to use the basement as a hiding spot anymore."

"What do you mean you didn't hear me?" he exclaimed. "I yelled so loud it hurt-s," he heaved. His face was red and stained with tears.

"Benny?" his therapist pulls him away from the memory. "Are you okay?"

Benny shook his head. "Yeah I'm okay," he tried to smile.

"You froze."

"I'm just a little tired that's all."

"Do you know how long the basement has been soundproofed?" his therapist asked again.

"I don't remember exactly but I think once I starting taking music classes. I must have been seven."

Benny blinked. Suddenly this place had changed too. The once warm and inviting room turned dark and horrifying before him. It didn't look like a kid's hangout anymore. It looked more and more like a room. Before he could register, he's swarmed with other memories — memories of being here with Mom whenever Dad was away.

“Mommy,” Benny said as they went to his room.

“Yes, baby?” Mom said as she helped carry some toys back into the basement.

“Why do we play in the basement when Daddy’s away?”

“I— I, It’s our little secret club when Daddy’s away. It’s nice, no?”

“It is nice. But Daddy should be here too.”

“Daddy’s not here right now and he wouldn’t want us to be here when he’s away. So it’s our secret club. Just you and me. No one else.”

“I like that.”

His head was starting to hurt. Everything was spinning. His body was trembling. It felt like he was jumping out of his skin. Was it true? Was what people say really true? That his dad did kidnap Mom? Benny shook his head. No, it couldn’t be. Mom loved Dad and if she didn’t she wouldn’t have stayed. If she didn’t love Dad then she wouldn’t have Benny. He ran into the bathroom and splashed water in his face, trying to shake himself out of the darkness.

“Benny, come on sport,” Dad calls for him. His voice was loud.

He was here, inside the basement.

“Dinner is ready,” Dad said.

Benny wiped his face with a hand towel.

“Is everything okay?” Dad asked, entering inside the bathroom.

Benny wiped his face intently and then stared at his reflection in his mirror. He doesn’t see himself, he just sees his dad. Two figures of his father in the mirror. Benny froze. What if… what if Mom had to have him? What if… Dad forced her?

“What’s wrong?”

He feels his father touch his shoulder. Benny winced. He looked around the bathroom and noticed the wallpaper. It was the same wallpaper but it was toned differently, it was evident that this bathroom was added last. “How long has this basement been soundproofed?” Benny asked.

Dad raised his eyebrow in confusion and laughed. “I don’t remember the exact date. It was such a long time ago. It was the second you picked up guitar.”

Benny stared at Dad. He answers this so smoothly. Certainly it had to be true. Why would Dad lie to him? “I feel like it’s been soundproofed for much longer.”

Dad blinked. “You were young then, memories aren’t exactly the most reliable.”

“I remember being much younger than that,” Benny began. “I accidentally locked myself in here. Mom couldn’t hear me.”

“That’s impossible,” he mumbled. “There’s no lock in the basement.”

“I was small,” Benny reminded. “There was no lock but I was too small to reach the door knob — there used to be a lock,” Benny went pale. He remembers it, remembers all the times Mom brought him here when Dad left and the times Dad brought them in. Everything made sense. All of it. All the times that Mom and him went out way too long and went to places that wasn’t close. “But it was on the outside.”

Dad laughed. “You’re talking nonsense Benny. Come on, let’s get out of here. Dinner’s waiting —

“Dad,” Benny bit the word out.

“Don’t talk to your father that way,” his father’s light tone changed. “Do you honestly think I would do such a thing?”

“Shut up!” Benny screamed, tears prickling out. He feels like a little boy again locked up in the basement — screaming as loud as he could

but no one could hear. He knows what Dad's trying to do, to manipulate him. "Did you hurt my mom? DID YOU?"

"What's going on?" Mom opened the basement door. "What's taking so long?"

"Honey, please tell your son that I didn't hurt you," Dad said, keeping his tone leveled.

"What?" Mom's eyes flickered.

"He's convinced that the allegations are true."

Benny couldn't help but to cry harder. He's never been scared of his dad before. He had no reason to but today, that changed. His dad was calm, always was but Benny could feel the anger seeping out. Dad was gritting his teeth ever so slightly. Benny ran to his mom like the little boy he was and sobbed into her. "Mom — please, tell me the truth. Did Dad hurt you?"

Mom held him tightly. "No, sweetie, no. He didn't. Daddy will never hurt me or you."

"Really?" Benny asked feebly.

Rey nodded, trying desperately not to wince in pain as her son held on to her by the wrist. He held her ever so gently but it was her bad wrist. "I love your Daddy very much and he loves us."

21. The Only One Who Noticed

For as long as Ben could remember, he always wanted a son.

He always wanted to be a father, wanted to be the best father he could. To be a better man than his father ever was. He had so many scars from his childhood. Everything wrong with him was from his parents. The way he was unable to connect to people. The way he was unable to socialize properly. The way he was detached. Was because of his parents. Ben made a promise to himself that his son would grow up in a normal environment and be loved and adored by everyone.

The more time passed, the less he thought about love.

He had been damaged from so many relationships and was left empty and brokenhearted.

Work made it more complicated to find love. He was always away. Constantly. It was hard to establish a relationship when he was always gone. And when he saw that girl, that girl from the coffee shop, he already lost hope with himself. Not only was she beautiful, she was also like him. She was lonely. Before he laid eyes on her, he always pictured his son to be an exact copy of him. Things changed when he saw her.

She was too young for him.

He couldn't help but to yearn for her.

By her age, he knew that she was inexperienced. He was drawn to her. He wanted to be her only experience so she could never have any bad ones like he did. So she would never get hurt.

He goes to his son later that evening. Once his son had some time alone. "Do you honestly think I would do such a thing?" he asked his son then.

"I don't know," his voice was faint.

“I love your mother.”

“But do you love me?” Benny wiped his eyes.

Ben’s heart skipped a final beat before breaking. “Of course I do,” he emphasized every little word. “Why do you think that?” he couldn’t help but to raise his voice. His tone was uneven from the impact of Benny’s words. That was the last thing he ever wanted to do, to make Benny feel unloved. “You’re my son.”

Benny looked up.

“You and your mother are my *world*,” Ben lifted his son’s chin. “I don’t want to lose either of you. Why do you think I made you visit me during all that time? I didn’t want to lose you from people’s lies. Benny, they’re just words. They’re not true.”

Benny swallowed hard. “Dad — please don’t cry.” Benny felt his stomach churn. He’s never seen his dad cry before.

Ben couldn’t help it. He hugged Benny, held him for life. “I love you so much. You don’t know how much I love you.”

Joss felt it was time to tell everyone about her and Benny. Her mom. Their friends. Benny and her talked it out and he was okay for them to go public with their relationship. To her surprise, no one takes it well.

“You’re too young to have a boyfriend,” her mom spat out.

“But mom — it’s Benny,” she couldn’t help but to blush. It’s Benny, the boy she grew up with. Her closest friend. The boy her mom always hoped she ended up with. Joss couldn’t help but to be surprised by her mother’s reaction.

“You’re only thirteen. You’re too young. You don’t need a relationship at this age. What do you know about relationships?”

“I know what not to do from watching you!” something in Joss snapped. She couldn’t help it. She hated it when adults belittled a child and their emotions. “Just because I’m young doesn’t mean I’m not capable of feeling things.”

“Joss,” her mother’s tone was firm. “Benny’s a nice boy, he really is —

“But?”

She watched her mother’s face soften then. “He’s going through a lot right now. The last thing I want is for you to get hurt.”

“What do you mean?”

“His family is still under investigation. I got interviewed by one of the detectives. I don’t know what’s going to happen to him.”

Joss blinked several times. “What did you say?”

“Nothing. I was just questioned about the Solos.”

“What did you tell them?” she yelled.

“I told them all that I know and what I know is that they’re good people.”

“His family are good people.”

“I know, sweetheart,” she squeezed her daughter’s arm then. “I know they are but I’m just thinking about this rationally. Of all the scenarios. What if its true? What if something does happen to his family? That’ll mean that Benny will be sent away. I don’t want you to go through that pain of getting close to Benny if you’re going to end up losing him.”

Joss shook her head frantically. “I don’t care — I just want to be with him.”

“You don’t mean that,” her mother said gently.

“I do, I do,” she was crying then. “I really do. I just want to be with him. I love him — and don’t say that I don’t. I really do love him.”

“I know you do, but right now I’m thinking about your heart. You’re so busy on taking care of him that you’re not looking out for yourself. I’m your mother and I’m going to do that for you. I just want what’s best for you. When the time comes for you to have a boyfriend, I want you to be with someone that’s going to be there.” She wiped her daughter’s tears. “I know you want to be there for him but it doesn’t mean it has to be romantically. You can just be there for him as a friend right now. And he needs one.”

For years Laurel always hoped Benny would be the one for her daughter. Benny was a nice boy, polite and thoughtful. He got along with everyone and was bright. But she’s not sure anymore. Benny was still a good boy but she’s not sure what was going to happen with Benny.

There was still a chance that the accusations are true. Benny would be sent away. The was the last thing Laurel wanted for Joss — to deal with the pain of having a long distance relationship but it was more than that. If the accusations were true that meant Benny needed so much time to heal. Laurel loved Benny, she loved him like a son but she doesn’t want that for her daughter — for her daughter to deal with.

Laurel hopes that it wasn’t true.

Not for her daughter but also for Benny’s sake.

She hopes that Benny and Rey were never abused. The Solo family were cleared for now but it’s not completely and it’s hard for Laurel to look at the family the same way. “Why do you want to be with him?” she asked her daughter the following day.

“He’s my best friend.”

Laurel blinked. Her daughter didn’t sound like a little girl. “But why him? Why not Greg or Max?”

“Benny’s different. He’s sweet and he’s always there for me. I can trust him with all my secrets. And he trusts me and when it’s just us,

there’s something there.”

Laurel tilted her head. She couldn’t help but to feel shaken by the tone of her daughter’s voice. “When did you start liking him?”

“When he got taken away,” Joss took a deep breath. “I missed him like crazy. Missed him more than anyone did. I didn’t know what I was feeling but when we finally saw each other, we kissed. And it all made sense.”

“You… guys kissed?”

Joss blushed. “Yeah, we did.”

“I hope he was respectful.”

“He was, he really was. He didn’t force me or anything. I wanted it — for him to kiss me.”

“What you’re feeling could be circumstantial.”

Joss shook her head. “No, I know it isn’t.”

“What makes you think that?”

“How I felt about him was always there, we just needed a push.”

Laurel’s heart skipped a beat. Joss really did love him. “If it’s meant to be, everything will fall into place. But Joss, whatever happens, don’t ever lose yourself.”

“I’m sad to inform that today’s my last day being your teacher,” Mr. Dameron announced. “It’s been a pleasure teaching such a bright class.”

The classroom fell silent.

Benny felt everyone’s eyes on him but they weren’t. They were staring at Mr. Dameron in shock and sadness.

“Why are you leaving?” Stacy asked, raising her hand firmly.

“I got offered to teach at a different district with children that need teachers more than this school.” Mr. Dameron frowned. “I had to take it.”

“We still need you,” Peter said.

Benny froze. Somehow those words did something to him. Benny looked up at Mr. Dameron.

Mr. Dameron gave him a bittersweet smile.

“You’re leaving because of the case, aren’t you?” Benny asked. It was after school and Mr. Dameron was alone in his classroom packing. “You’re being relocated,” Benny’s voice lowered. He was young but after months of being away, Benny was more alert. More aware. After all, he was son of an FBI agent.

Poe Dameron raised his eyebrow. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Benny frowned. It hurts, not knowing if an adult was telling the truth or not. “I should have picked it up sooner. All the little signs. All the secrecy. You work for the FBI too or something similar.” It made sense. Fell into place. How Mr. Dameron just came out of nowhere. Why Mr. Dameron was so interested in his mom.

Poe stared at the boy. He couldn’t help but falter at the sight of the boy’s crestfallen face. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“The rumors must be true, you were the one who made accusations against my dad.”

“Benny —

“I know I’m just a kid and everyone wants to protect me but this also affects me too,” his eyes began to tear. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve.

“It’s exactly what I have to do,” Poe emphasized, trying to make sense to the child. He stared at the boy, trying to show the boy his sadness too. Poe had grown fond of Benny and it was the reason why it took Poe a long time to report it. “For it’s the right thing.”

“My dad isn’t a bad-d g-uy,” Benny heaved, unable to speak. It was the first time in a long time that he felt an adult was being honest. “He really isn’t.”

“As of now it’s still under investigation. For all we know, I could be wrong,” Poe gave him a small smile, desperately trying to comfort the boy. His mouth twitched from giving the boy a false sense of security but Poe knew that the boy needed it. Needed something to hold on before falling apart. “We just have to wait and see. I hope I’m wrong, honestly I do.” Poe meant it. Meant every word. “But I believe in the universe and that it’ll do the right thing. Benny,” his voice went low. “Promise me that whatever happens, that you’ll *always* do the right thing, okay?”

Benny forced himself to nod. He was trembling. Having Mr. Dameron be relocated was an omen. That things will never be better. Or the same. “Okay.”

Mr. Dameron’s voice was etched into Benny’s mind. It had been days since Mr. Dameron had left. His words had an impact on Benny. *Do the right thing*. That was all Benny could think about. He decides to go to her — Joss. She was the only person he trusted completely. Blindly.

He goes to her in the middle of the night.

He hasn’t been sleeping. He’s been having weird dreams. They weren’t really dreams but memories. Memories of all the trips he had with his mom — just the two of them. They were strange trips. Mom would pack up several bags but they ended up coming back home by the end of the day. Was she trying to escape with him? He doesn’t know what to believe. He was a little boy when it happened and he’s not sure if he’s remembering it correctly. But it happened multiple times.

He tells Joss about this. Tells her about the basement too. For she was the only person he trusted.

“Have you told your therapist about this?” she asked, holding his hand.

“No, he swallowed hard.” I didn’t know that some of these memories existed to be honest. And most of it I didn’t think much of it until now. “

“You have to tell someone,” she held his hand tighter.

“I don’t know if what I am remembering is true or not. Hearing people talk about me has been affecting me. I feel like being around them has been altering my memories.”

“Well that’s the therapist’s job to find out.”

“It’s more than that.”

She sighed. “I know.”

“My mom is happy —

“Do you know for sure that she is?”

“She is.” His answer was automatic. “I don’t want anything bad to happen to my family. I don’t want my dad to go to jail — I don’t want to be sent away. I don’t want to lose this life. You don’t know how much hell I went through when I was away, Joss.”

“I know.”

“Here is my whole life. I don’t want to lose it and I don’t want to lose you.”

She shut her eyes for a moment. She exhaled and then she looked at him. “I don’t want to lose you either but I rather have you safe.” She kissed his mouth. He kissed her back, holds her tight — crushing her body to his. He wants to hold on to her. “You know what you have to do.”

Benny nodded. “I know.”

Poe was supposed to leave the city days ago but he couldn't help but to linger.

His droid beeped in frustration.

"I know, buddy it's just hard. I don't know why I'm being relocated when it isn't a closed case."

BB-8 rolled about and beeped again.

"I know, they feel like I'm getting too involved and personal. It's hard when there's a child involved."

BB gave him a look.

Poe bit his lip and nodded. His droid was right. "Come on, buddy. Let's go." All his bags were already in the car. Everything else was already shipped ahead. He carried his droid into his car and put a seatbelt on him for security. Poe hopped into the car and drove away. He was being relocated three hundred miles away. It was going to be a long drive. He could have taken a plane but he wanted to set his mind free.

He's been consumed by Rey for far too long.

The evidence wasn't enough for court. The paperwork that Ben Solo made for her was perfect. He hopes that she finds the strength to set herself free but the more time passes the more he's losing his faith.

"We were too late, buddy."

His droid tried to reassure him.

Poe slightly smiled. "Thanks." He turned up the music and let his mind go.

Two hours past and Poe was running low on fuel. He stops by the nearest gas station and fills up his car and buys a ready made sandwich. He lets himself relax in the gas station and even treats himself to a soda. Once he was done, he headed off and hopped back into the freeway.

It was getting dark but he keeps driving.

He just wants to keep himself busy — to stop thinking about her for once.

But all he could think about was her. He's gotten to know what she wanted everybody to know about her but also more. Much more. She would never tell him anything outside of her boundaries but he could tell between the lines. There was a long time ago she wanted to escape but she had given up. There was so much that he wanted to know about her before she was kidnapped but he'll never know.

Poe pulled away from his thoughts as he noticed that his steering wheel was slowly moving on its own. He raised his eyebrow. He gripped on to his steering wheel but it still moved in the opposite direction.

"BB what's going on?" he yelled.

BB beeped in dismay. BB didn't know either.

Poe attempted to press on the brakes but the car kept going and faster.

His steering wheel started to swerve.

"BB! Restart the car," he ordered, trying desperately to get control over the car. "BB!"

His droid wasn't responding back.

"BB!" The car was going over a hundred and swerving all about, purposely trying to hit another car.

He turned to look at his droid. His droid was powered down. Poe's eyes widened. Someone was taking over. Quickly, he acted fast and held the steering wheel with one hand as he attempted to reach for his cellphone to call for help. His cellphone was in the backseat and too far for him to reach.

He exhaled as he unbuckled his seatbelt. It was all or nothing.

He braced himself as the car went faster and faster — it was moving off the road and rolling down the hill. He pressed the button several times but the seatbelt was still latched to him. Frantically he reached for his glove compartment for something to use to cut him free. The impact was rough, broken glass was seeping into his skin and face.

He searched in his compartment but before he could grab something, his seatbelt unbuckled on its own.

22. What Happened to Ben?

The images of the accident is everywhere.

Leia overlooks the photos and decides to make herself a hot cup of coffee. She hums to herself and changes the channel to something cheerful. The last thing she needed was something to bring her spirits even more down.

Leia doesn't know the whole story about her son and his girlfriend.

To be honest she doesn't want to know. The only thing that does matter was that this girl was now a part of their family. Rey's going to give her a grandchild and that's the only thing she needed to know.

Her daughter in law is so quiet and reserved. She's only nervous that's all, Leia tries to remind herself. This girl doesn't have much in the world and she's nervous about winning his mother's love. Good. As it should be. At first Leia wanted to hate her, honestly she did. This girl was not good enough for her son and yet she couldn't help but to care for the girl.

And Leia likes to take care of broken things.

And so did her son.

This girl must be nineteen or so, Leia collects. Her poor son must have been so ashamed of loving someone much younger than him. No wonder why he hid Rey for so long from her. It's evident that this girl comes from below the poverty line. Leia can tell by the way Rey is uncomfortable with talking about her past.

Leia has to persuade Ben to let her spend time with Rey while he was at work. She has every right to. She wanted to get to know her daughter in law. Leia didn't want to like this girl honestly she didn't. But after

spending time with her for the past few months, Leia's grown to love her. Leia always wanted to have a daughter. Rey is sweet, the sweetest girl that Ben's ever brought home. Rey doesn't speak much but when she does, it's real.

She doesn't mind tagging along with Leia to get her hair done or go shopping. Rey would never buy things or take on Leia's offer of buying things for her. Rey carries her bags for her too. Even if this girl was buttering her up, Leia appreciated it very much so. Rey genuinely seems to enjoy spending time with her, as if Rey saw her as her mother.

Rey reminds her so much of the daughter she always wanted. Leia spent her whole life wishing for a little girl. A little girl to dress up and have someone accompany Leia with her errands. Leia couldn't explain it but Rey reminds her so much of a little girl — in the best possible way. Maybe it's because the girl was younger than her son. As much as Leia hated to admit, she adores Rey.

Leia makes them stop by a baby store. Rey lingers in the clothing section, holding on to a pastel blue onesie with tiny white sailboats. Rey smiles fondly at the sight. "You're going to be such a good mom," Leia comments.

The praise startles the girl. "Really?"

Leia pursed her lips from smiling. "I just know it."

"I'm so scared," Rey admitted. She lets go of the article of clothing. Her eyes are large and glassy. Leia couldn't help but to aw. Such a pretty girl. Leia was going to have a beautiful grandbaby. "I've never taken care of anyone before."

"Neither have I but I think my son turned out just fine."

"Where are we going?" Rey asks as she buckled her seatbelt.

"We're going to Michael's. We're going to get decorations for your baby shower."

“Baby shower?”

“Of course. It’s mandatory for mothers to throw their daughters baby showers.”

Rey’s eyes lit up. She was glowing even more if that was possible. She was squealing, tapping her feet with joy.

Leia desperately tried to suppress her smile but she couldn’t. Even if this girl was playing with her, this girl was good at it because it feels real. This girl’s smile was contagious. No wonder why Ben fell in love with this girl. She understands why the girl was happy. Her family wanted nothing to do with her for marrying so young.

“I’m very thankful to have you as a mother in law.”

Leia ignores the statement even though it was warming her heart in such ways. She hates showing affection after years being with Han. “Do you have an idea how you want your baby shower?”

“None whatsoever. I’m not good with planning things. Or decorating.”

“Leave it all to me dear.”

Leia and Rey spend the whole day making paper flowers for the baby shower. They were making flowers for the photo wall. Leia hates how happy she is doing this with Rey. It feels like arts and crafts with the daughter she always wanted but never got. Rey is diligent and patient with the flowers and so was she.

Leia hates so much how much she likes Rey.

She was suppose to hate the young girl that seduced her son. She doesn’t though and it pisses her off. The way Rey is must be an act because this girl is too pure and precious. No one can ever put up with Leia and yet this girl does and seems to enjoy her company. The nerve. Leia knows bullshit when she sees it. This girl is a gold digger and

purposely got knocked up to be taken care of the rest of her life. Leia bites her lip as she remembers her son telling her that Rey bled during their first time. Her son wouldn't make a lie about that.

She looks at Rey. Rey is so careful with making the flowers and pleased too. It doesn't feel staged. It doesn't when Rey hugs her and it certainly doesn't when Rey is eager to let Leia do her hair.

Rey sensed she was being watched. "What is it?"

"Nothing." Unknown to Leia, there was a smile on her lips. Her son picked a good one. She forces herself to change the subject. "We still have a lot to do for tomorrow. We have to finish cooking and blowing up the balloons and flower arrangements." They were going to make a whole dessert table — cookies, cupcakes, chocolate covered pretzels and strawberries, the whole nine yards. Not to mention the actual food for the party. It's going to be half catering so it makes it easier.

"This is so fun," Rey grinned.

"You know this is supposed to be stressful." She really hates how much she's enjoying this.

Leia decides to buy Rey a dress for her baby shower. She decided this two weeks ago. Pulled out the tags so Rey can't refuse and would have to wear it. It's a long chiffon dress, the prettiest shade of periwinkle blue and it was off the shoulder too. It was modest, feminine, and pretty. She doesn't ask for permission to do Rey's hair. Leia just does it. She braids Rey's hair into a crown braid and puts in blue forget-me-nots and baby's breath in her hair. Naturally, Leia does Rey's makeup too.

If this girl was going to be a forever addition, Leia's definitely going to nag her son into marrying this girl. Leia wants to be a part of the whole wedding planning and take Rey wedding dress shopping. This girl was so pretty and Leia liked dressing her up.

"There. All pretty like a princess."

Rey stared at herself in the mirror. She doesn't even recognize her reflection. Rey keeps touching her hair to confirm that it was her. Slowly a smile appeared on the girl's face. "Thank you!" she hugs Leia. "Thank you so much mom. Thank you."

Leia blinked. "What did you call me?"

Rey pulled away. She's stammering. "I'm-I'm sorr-y."

Leia wrapped her arms around the girl. "Don't be."

"I see why you love her," Leia comments. She and Ben were eating still while Rey was playing with the kids in the Solo family. The kids adore her, all begging to be held. The girl was glowing in that blue dress. Leia awed at the sight. Rey's going to be such a good mom.

"She's amazing. She really is," Ben breathes.

Han comes by and put his arms around the both of them. "She's a keeper," his speech is slurred. He's already drunk. "Good job son. Your mother's even warming up to her."

Leia rolled her eyes and shrugs him off of her. "I can't help it. I always fall for charm and bullshit."

"Thanks," Han grinned and kisses her on the cheek. God he's really drunk.

Leia nudges him away. She hates the smell of cheap beer and cologne. "You better not hurt her," Leia teases her son. It was meant to be a joke but her tone was hard. "Do you understand?"

Ben laughs. "Yes mam."

Rey talks more to Leia than her own damn son. She calls Leia every single day to ask how she's doing. It makes Leia so damn happy. She

doesn't feel alone anymore. Rey is amazing and literally the daughter she's always wanted.

"You have to marry this girl," Leia insists.

"She can't exactly fit into a wedding dress."

Leia rolled her eyes. "Not right now. I need at least a year to plan."

Ben doesn't hide his smirk.

"Don't give me that face Benjamin Solo! I'm being serious."

"I know you are. It's just funny to see you all riled up."

Leia ignored his statement. He sounded so much of his father. "She's such a good girl. She deserves the best."

"I know she does."

Leia finishes her coffee and jumps into the shower. There was no escape from the darkness of the situation involving her son and her daughter in law. She lets herself get lost in her thoughts. Under the hot water, she thinks. She thinks about all the memories she had with Rey over the years and how much Rey clung on to her like a daughter. Was there more to it?

What if it was true?

That this girl was kidnapped? That this girl became attached to Leia because she never had a mother? Leia shook her head. No. It couldn't be. Leia knows her son and her son wasn't a monster. Her son loved Rey and Rey loved him. She froze under the water as a memory crept inside her mind.

She remembers it, years ago back when Benny was only a few months old. She had put together that Rey didn't know how to drive and discussed with Ben to teach her. Leia remembers Rey calling her on the phone crying shortly after.

“Hi-hi Mom.”

Leia stayed in place. Rey sounded so shaky. “What’s wrong dear?” she clutched on to the phone.

“It’s nothing,” her voice was breaking. “Me and Ben just had a fight about him teaching me how to drive.”

Leia frowned. “How did it go?” she asked, keeping her tone leveled. She’s never heard Rey sound so distressed before.

“It didn’t go well. He doesn’t want to teach-teach me how to drive.”

Leia’s eyebrows furrowed. She’s going to give Ben a piece of her mind later. “Tell him that he’s very wrong.”

There’s silence then.

“Rey?”

No response.

Leia hears muffled noises over the phone.

“Rey?” Leia calls her name out again. What was going on?

“I was wondering can me and the baby stay a night at your place, please?” she’s whispering. She sounds so scared.

“Of course dear.”

In the background, Leia can hear her son yelling.

“You’re not going anywhere!” Ben snaps at Rey. “You’re not going anywhere from me.”

“I don’t feel safe here tonight.” Rey’s voice is small.

“You only want to learn to drive to get away from me. I’m not letting you. Your place is here.”

Leia winced. She’s never heard her son sound like his father before. He sounds so threatening. Rey sounds like she’s crying. It makes Leia

very upset. Leia doesn't care what they were fighting about. She doesn't give a damn. Her son talking like that wasn't okay at all. "Rey," Leia's tone is firm. "Give the phone to Ben. I want to speak to him." Leia wasn't going to let her son talk to his wife like that. Leia reaches for her keys as she gave her son a piece of her mind. She curses him out, doesn't refrain from being painfully honest.

"I don't have time to teach her how to drive," he growled back. "She's being stubborn and not understanding."

"I'm sure you have enough money to pay for a teacher." Leia gets into the car. She takes no time with driving.

"I don't want a stranger to teach her. The world's a dangerous place, Mom."

"Then I can teach her," Leia insisted.

Ben laughs bitterly at the thought.

"I don't care what you guys are fighting about. I taught you better not to speak to a woman like that. I'm on my way to pick up Rey and the baby."

"You're not going to take them. They're staying here. Rey's just being dramatic and wants to make a big deal of it."

Leia ignores her son's statement. "I don't care if she's overreacting. You don't talk to the mother of your child like that. She's going to stay with me for the night until you cool down and come to your senses."

Leia takes Rey and the baby to her home. Ben was cooled down by the time she arrived and obliged to helping his mother gather Rey and the baby's belongings.

"I'm sorry," Ben looked at Rey feebly.

Rey doesn't look back. She holds on to their baby protectively.

"I didn't mean to yell," he adds. He grabs her by the shoulder.

“Ben,” Leia shakes her head. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean to be this mad but I think Rey wants some space for tonight.”

His jaw twitched. “She’s fine.”

“I don’t give a damn,” Leia spat out. “You don’t talk to her like that. Ever.”

Rey cries the whole time during the car ride.

Leia doesn’t ask what’s wrong. She remains silent and gives her daughter in law some space. It hurts a lot to see the girl so sad. She loves Rey as her own. When they get to her place, the baby is fast asleep. Rey puts the baby in the crib. Leia had bought the crib the moment she found out she was going to be a grandmother.

Leia gestures for Rey to sit on the couch while Leia fixes something for the both of them. Rey does so. “How are you feeling?”

“I’m sad,” she admitted.

“First fights are always hard,” Leia tells her gently. “But you guys are a great couple. You guys will make up soon enough. Ben’s a good man,” Leia reminded her. “Even if he does have so much of his father in him.”

Rey tried to smile but couldn’t. She stared at her baby that was only a few feet away from them. Her eyes wonder around the house and settles to focus on the childhood photos of Ben. All she could see were photos of the future of how their son is going to look like over the years. “Was Ben always like this?” she exhaled. She was trembling, hugging herself.

Leia raised her eyebrow. “Like what?”

“Possessive.”

“No.” Leia stared at the ceiling and sighed.

"What happened to Ben?" her lips quivered. She up now, staring at the photos on the walls longingly of an innocent boy. There's light in his eyes in these photos, a light that Rey never got to know. The brightness of this boy was radiant and consuming. Rey hopes that their son will have this light. "What happened to him?"

"I know deep inside it's my fault." Leia sighed. She reaches for Rey's hand and squeezes it firmly. "Things with his father and I was never perfect. But I would like to think its his work that made him this way."

"What about his work?"

"It's very draining. Emotionally and mentally draining. He sees a lot of bad things happen to good people. I know he has a lot of trauma from it even though he'll never say it. You can't really blame him for being so protective over the ones he loves."

Rey swallowed hard.

"You know he loves you."

"I know."

She wonders now if that night was an attempt for a cry of help. Leia shakes her head. She can't look back at the past. She knows that Rey loves her son and he loved Rey. And Rey stayed with Ben all this time. And that was all that mattered now.

Leia hears her phone ringing. She gets out of the shower and gets dressed. She knows what this was about so she takes her time. Instead of checking the missed call, she goes downstairs and answers the door. "Morning," she greets her son. She gestures him to go inside. She closes the door tight.

Ben doesn't greet her. He skips the formality. "Mom," his voice is stern. "What did you do?"

“What do you mean?” Leia feigned innocence. She suddenly hears the background noise of the television set. How silly of her. She had forgotten to turn it off. In the background it was covering the news regarding Poe Dameron again.

“Don’t play games. You know what I’m talking about.”

Leia smiles at him. “I did what I had to do.”

23. Nobody Knows

Part One: The End

This is the end
Pretend that you want it
Don't react
The damage is done
The police are coming too slow now
I would have died
I would have loved you all my life

— Losing Your Memory by Ryan Star

"Ben."

"Ben."

"Ben," his mother says his name as if he was dying.

Perhaps he was. Because his mother was calling him over and over again but it didn't register until now. His ears felt like they were bleeding, as if she had pierced them. His vision was blurred. His body suddenly was heavy, unable to support his own weight. Ben searches for a place to sit but he couldn't find anything and so he sits on the ground. Her voice is like a wake up call, a summoning. "I never meant for this to go this far," he shook his head.

His mother knelt down in front of him. "I know you didn't," she said calmly. She touches his head. She froze as she finds white in his hair. "I know you didn't." She purses her lips and sighed. "Are you mad at me?"

"Of course," he bitterly laughed. How could she ask such a question like that? "Why did you do it? Mom they're going to think it was me. Mom —

“Why did you?” she countered.

He blinked. He observed her first before answering. She’s relaxed but he shouldn’t be surprised. She was a politician. She wasn’t afraid of going through lengths in getting what she wanted. She’s been a politician for years and it was evident about how desensitized she was. “Why did I what?”

“Ben,” she shut her eyes. She sounds tired. Worn. She takes a step back, there is caution in her movements. As if she was terrified of him as well. As if Ben could ever do anything to his own mother. “Ben. You know what this is about. Why did you?”

He shouldn’t be drinking.

Ben knew damn well not to but it was New Year’s Eve. He’s not good with social settings and he needed something to settle his nerves. His mother is giving him a look when he gulps down another shot. He takes another out of spite.

He doesn’t want to be at his mother’s party and have to be formal with his family members and his mother’s friends and acquaintances. He wanted to be with the girl that he loved on New Year’s Eve. He wanted desperately to bring her but he’s knows that she wasn’t ready. It kills him to know that she’s spending her New Year’s in the basement alone.

They had sex for the first time on Christmas — only a few days ago. It’s too early for him to bring her out in the open. For his mother to know about. That’s why he had to play it safe. He doesn’t know how Rey will react around other people, not after what happened. He feels sick with himself. He wished he had gone slow with her, perhaps give Rey her first kiss on Christmas with some mistletoe. He should have done that. That would have been romantic. There was a lot of things he should have done with Rey and it was more transparent now when he’s being surrounded by people being intimate with one another. It wasn’t even midnight yet but the couples were in love.

The sight of pure affection makes his stomach churn.

He was never going to have that type of relationship with her.

Rey was never going to love him but he doesn't blame her. He took her and kept her locked up. He hurt her and he took her virginity. She was so young and he knew it was wrong but he wanted her. Ben really was a monster.

He keeps his eyes on his phone, staring helplessly as the time went by. Perhaps she was happy he wasn't there with her this holiday. Maybe she's curled up in bed watching a good movie or maybe she's already asleep. Ben mixes himself another drink. He knows his mother and the only way he was allowed to leave was if he was drunk. His mother was a woman of high status and her reputation was important to her.

She had been watching his every move like a hawk, making sure that he didn't slip out and leave.

Even if he ruined Rey's night, he rather be there with her on their first New Year's together. He doesn't care if she hated him, he doesn't ever want her to be lonely.

Ben gets himself a taxi to get back home.

He's drunk. He fumbles to get his keys to his house and nearly trips while making his visit down to the basement. He finds her awake, sitting on her bed occupied with a book in her hand. He stood by the doorway and studies the sight. He murmured to himself. It was really evident that this was all a show for him. She was wearing the gold dress he got for her still. It was a dress he bought just in case he felt she was ready to go out in public on New Year's Eve. He wanted to take her out but it was too dangerous. "You've been waiting for me," his speech was slurred.

"I haven't."

"I can tell by your book. You've been on the same page before I left."

Rey couldn't help but to blush. "I knew you would come for me." It amazes her that despite him being heavily intoxicated, he was still

attentive and alert. His face was red and his eyes were all over the place.

He nodded earnestly. He stood in place, examining her again. "I'm sorry to make you wait. It was really hard to get a taxi at night on a holiday." It took him an hour but he didn't feel it was necessary to inform her.

Rey looked at the clock. It was eleven thirty.

"Why are you wearing that?" he asked then.

Her face grew hot before him. "I thought we were going to do something tonight. And it seemed fitting with the holiday." It was a pretty dress, shimmery and draped her figure nicely. It was a rose gold colored halter dress and it hit at her knees. Modest with a touch of elegance. "This dress isn't something I can wear always in the basement."

"Not tonight sweetheart," he said lightly to dismiss it. He watches her quietly sigh. There was no animosity in the sound. No defiance. No anger. This startles him. He's not sure if she understood or was afraid to respond negatively. She turns away from him because that's the only thing she could do in this small place. There was no place for her to be alone when he was present. "Tell me what's on your mind," he pleads.

"I don't understand," she exhaled. She shook her head. "I don't."

"What don't you understand?" he keeps his voice low.

"I decided to stay with you and we… did things and yet you still keep me locked up." She pauses to gather herself. "Isn't what I've done prove to you that I want to be with you? That I'm not going anywhere?"

"It does —

"Then why am I locked up on New Year's Eve?"

He doesn't answer. He doesn't know how to.

"Why did you get me this dress?" her eyebrows furrowed. "Why did you when you didn't take me out? Was this to taunt me?"

Ben flinched. Did she truly believe that he was that cruel to her? That he enjoyed seeing her suffer? That he liked having her be hopeful for him? "I bought the dress with the intention to take you out to my mother's party."

"Why didn't I go then?" she demanded. She's upset. She has every right to be. He let her down. He gave her something to look forward to — talked about his parents — his childhood home — only to take it away.

"I don't think I was ready," he whispered.

She blinked several times, trying to get her tears to stop. "It doesn't make it any better."

"I came back to you," he frowned. He cups her chin and presses a soft kiss. She shrugs him away but he doesn't pull back. "That's why I'm here. I wanted to be with you."

"You're drunk."

"I had to get drunk to be let out," he chuckled weakly.

A slight smile crept upon her face. She doesn't want to smile but it was inescapable when he's giving her a sheepish smile with those big sad eyes of his. He perks up at the sight of her smile. He nuzzles her then, pressing his nose against her neck. Rey couldn't help but to chuckle. A large man being this childish and affectionate was ridiculous but it was infectious. Before she knew it, she was doing the same.

They laugh faintly.

His arm is wrapped underneath her chest. He peppers tiny wet kisses, the kind he knows how to elicit reluctant giggles from her. The quietness of the room isn't present anymore. Play filled the room with warmth and brief snippets of joy. He finds her mouth and kisses her. He finds her waist and holds her there as he kisses her, for as long as he could.

No many how many times he kissed her, it always feels like the first time and yet also the last.

She's the one to pull away. She touches his hair, tucks a lock behind his ear. She quickly kisses his nose. "Let's watch the countdown," she suggests.

Ben nodded and turns on the television set. He swallowed hard at the screen of people clapping and reaching for confetti as the host plays back highlights of the New Year Countdown. He read the time clock. It was twelve ten. It was over. They had missed the countdown. He turned to Rey and reaches for her hand. She stood there motionlessly. There was no expression on her face. "Are you alright?"

She forces a nod. "I'm fine, honestly I am," her lips were trembling.

He kisses her temple. "We have many New Year's Eves to look forward to."

She smiles at the thought.

"Happy New Year's Rey."

"I love her," he responds to his mother.

His mother smiled sadly. "I know you do." Her voice is soft — too delicate, as if she wasn't there.

The television set is on still. They don't notice until there a change in tone. Mundane robotic voices became chipper. They turn and stared at the set as the news reporter announced that Poe Dameron had just woken up from his coma only hours ago. Ben's skin tightened.

"What are you going to do?" "he asked her.

"What will you do?"

Ben didn't know how much he broke his wife until Benny was five years old.

Their son was finally old enough for school but she was not at all excited. She kept insisting for their son to hold her hand as they walked him to this first day. She was emotional as all mothers were on their child's first day. Rey's eyes were tearing ever so often, her lips quivering when Benny lets go and runs into class. Benny was only a child. He didn't address his mother at all and had completely forgotten her in the presence of toys and new friends beyond his playdates. None of the other adults thought much of this but not all adults were like Rey.

It was normal for parents to be sad seeing their child grow up.

Ben knew it wasn't. She was attached to Benny for it had just been them for their son's entire life. "It's okay sweetheart," Ben coaxed, grabbing her by her arm. "He's doing perfectly fine. We'll pick him up soon enough."

Rey hesitated. "Are you sure?" she's crying quiet tears then. Other parents notice but they don't think much of it. They only see a smothering mother and not a young girl who was dependent on her son. "We should stay a little longer just in case he —

"He's fine," Ben presses a soft kiss on her temple. "We'll be back to pick him at two thirty."

She blinked, perplexed by his words. "That's such a long time — what if he starts looking for me? He's never been apart from me for that long."

"It'll take some time adjusting but it's going to be okay. Separation will be good for the both of you."

Rey doesn't take being apart from Benny well.

She's done everything for the house trying to keep herself occupied. The house is spotless, the laundry is done, everything is rearranged, and dinner is ready for far too early by twelve in the afternoon. She's tired of TV and rightfully so due to… her circumstances. She doesn't take naps

because she's afraid she'll over sleep and won't pick Benny on time. She goes to the park often for exercise and for the past month that Benny's in school, she's lost weight.

Rey reads a lot but doesn't quite enjoy it like she used to. Her mind drifts back to Benny. How was Benny doing? Was he enjoying school? Wass he looking for her? Their son consumes her thoughts to a point she looks for excuses for Benny not to go to school. Sometimes Rey takes Benny out early.

She calls Ben more now. Ben can't exactly pick up all the time because he's at work. She's anxious and restless. She misses their son. She cries often in between the time that she's away from their son. She cries in the basement and the basement only. Ben knows this because she smells like detergent mostly now.

Ben's worried. Benny's been at school for a month but she's not doing any better. She's depressed and she's withering away. It doesn't help when work keeps him mostly away. He's afraid to touch her now. She keeps getting smaller, he could break her. She wants to be pleasured right now, not embarrassed anymore to be forward. "Honey," he begins. He's overwhelmed as her little hands reach for the buckle of his belt. "Can you be on top tonight?"

It's not that he's in the mood for it, it's just he's really afraid of crushing her.

She nods but he doesn't recognize her. She's aggressive, pushing him to the bed and kisses him all over. "Baby, slow down," he whispered. She's trying to get him aroused. Her touches are rough. Haste. And not at all gentle. "I'm not going anywhere." He holds her still by her waist. Her hands are wrapped around his shaft. "Baby you're jumping out of your skin again."

Rey frowned. "I'm sorry I just— I just want you in me right now." She's crying then, her face creasing altogether.

Ben sits up and holds her hands in place. She fidgets. "I know it's hard but it'll get better." He kisses her forehead. "Benny's so happy. He

has more friends now than just his playdates. He likes his teacher. He likes learning. Don't you like him being happy?"

"I do," she bit her lip. She was heaving, tears still streaming down her face. "I do-I really do, it's just I miss him." He squeezes her hands firmly. He wants to touch her hair but he's afraid she'll try to avoid this conversation and attempt to get him aroused. "I'm so lonely." She could barely breathe. She hadn't cried this much since he took her.

"You're not alone."

"I am. You're always away with work and Benny is all I have."

He swallowed hard. "I'm sorry," he rasped. That was all he could say. What else could he say? There was nothing he could say to redeem what he had done to her. She was only a child and yet he took her and made her his. He purposely got her pregnant so they could be a family. There was nothing he could do to take all he had done back.

"It's okay. If you didn't we wouldn't have Benny." She smiled then. Ben wrapped his arms around her and buried his face into her chest. He searches for her heartbeat. To hear it. Feel it. He finds her heartbeat and he's soothed by it. She's here. She's still here and so was he. "Maybe it's time we have another baby."

Ben's heart stopped beating. He looked up at her. She was calm and collected and yet there was something unsettling about it. "No," he says carefully. Cautiously. He watches her fall apart again. He holds on to her from slipping. "It's not the right time."

"Benny's in school now. I would like to have another baby," she begged.

"We're not going to have another baby to replace him —

"I'm not replacing him. I want another one —

"To fill in the void."

Rey winced and went silent.

For once, Ben feels it too. The emptiness she felt. It's strong. Intense. Intoxicating. He feels so paralyzed, as if he was drowning. Rey had gone through so much even before him and the only thing that made her truly happy was being a mother. She never had the family she wanted. After years of being abused by a string of foster parents she ran away. The only happiness she had was when they were a family, the family they never had. "We will have more children," he assured her. "But for now I want you to enjoy life for yourself. You are more than just my wife and Benny's mother."

"What am I?"

"What do you mean? You are Rey."

"I know who I am but what else am I? What else is there for me besides being your wife and his mother?"

Ben paused and thought for a moment. She didn't anything besides their family. She had no real identity and he did that to her. He touches her cheek. "Maybe you should take the time to find out," he smiles. She looked at him in bewilderment. "Benny's going to school now maybe it's time for you to go to school as well. Maybe pick up some hobbies."

"School?" she dismisses the idea. "I didn't even finish high school."

"I can fix up some paperwork and you can take a few classes at community college. Find something you like," he offers. "I know you're worried about Benny so you don't have to have a full schedule. Even one class will be good for you. You can take a class and then pick him up afterwards."

Rey shook her head immediately. "I… don't know."

She's scared. They both know it.

"There's nothing wrong in trying a class," he coaxed. "If you don't like a class you can try another. But I think it'll be good for you to find out more about yourself. Maybe make some friends."

“I already have friends.” She was friends with their neighbors Finn and Rose and perhaps some of the Benny’s friends’ parents.

“I know you do but there’s nothing wrong with having more friends.”

OoOoO

She tries to persist that she doesn’t need to go to college. Ben ignores her reluctance and enrolls her to two elective classes. Those were the only classes that allowed late registration. She’s worst than Benny. There are times where she refuses to go to her classes. He only knows when he calls her up periodically and ask how her classes are. He knows when Rey is lying. She can’t make up things on the spot when he asks her specific questions about the curriculum. There are pauses to her answers when she lies.

Ben tries to convince her to go to her classes but after three months, he gives up. He hates the idea of forcing her to do something that she doesn’t like. He’s already done enough. He suggests she tries applying for a job to keep her occupied. Except Rey is stubborn and purposely bombs her interviews. At first he doesn’t want to believe that she’s doing this but that’s the only answer for why she hasn’t gotten hired. She used to live on her own before him living on odd jobs alone.

He has his mother take Benny for the weekend so he can spend time with his wife.

Her depression is not getting better.

“What’s going on?” he asked. He sits her down on the couch and gives her some food to eat. “You should be taking the time for yourself while Benny’s away at school. I don’t expect you to be a doctor but maybe years down the line find something you like that you want to major. Benny’s going to be school for the next seventeen years. I want you to have the life you never got.”

“I don’t know,” she shut her eyes. “I really don’t know.”

Ben frowned.

She's shaking again. The sandwich he gave her is mostly on the floor by how much she's shaking. "I want to enjoy life. I honestly do. I want to go to school, make new friends, and work it's just I don't know how anymore."

"It's okay that you're scared," he reminded her. He sets the food down and squeezes her hand. "We're just going to take baby steps."

"It's scary being something beyond Mrs. Solo."

His heart stopped beating. "Why is that?"

"Because being Mrs. Solo is definite," she breathed. "I know who I am when I'm her. I'm your wife and I'm Benny's mother. Making something of myself beyond that is terrifying. Nothing's set in stone. Anything can happen. But I tried Ben, honestly I tried. Every time I try it makes me thing of the way things were before."

"Before what? Before me?"

Rey nodded. "I don't know how I managed to make it before you."

"You're still with me," he reminded her. He wrapped his arms around her and stoked her back. She's sniffling now, sobbing into his chest. "You don't have to worry about anything. You're with me there's nothing to worry about. You're free to find yourself without worrying about making ends meet. You can be anything Rey. You can be more. You can be a teacher. You can be an artist. You can be a programmer. You can be anything."

"I know that but I don't know why I get like this."

Because for the last six years, this was all she knew. Being under Ben's care. Being in the basement. Being Mrs. Solo. She was more than just depressed. She was scarred. He traumatized her, made an independent girl learn to be attached and dependent. There was nothing wrong with women wanting to be just mothers but only if it was their choice. It was never Rey's choice. "I'm sorry," he held her tight. As if it was his last time with her. "Maybe it's too overwhelming for you. We can try again next year. Would you like that?"

Rey lifted her head and nodded. "Yeah. I don't think I'm ready just yet."

"It's okay. You're so young. You have so much time left. Once you find yourself, we'll have another baby."

Years passed and Rey never found herself.

She was twenty eight and only managed to complete three elective classes in the span of seven years. She completed an intro dance class, a ceramics class, and a women's study class. She found passion in helping people though. She volunteers at the local community center when Benny's at school and was active in the PTA. Everything she was passionate about revolved around their child however. Ben still tries to get her go beyond that, to be more.

But this wasn't something she's used to. Rey will never be healed. He had damaged her too much. She will never be the same girl he saw at the coffee shop. And yet he wanted them to have another baby. Ben truly was a monster. He can try to paint over the details and make new memories but what he's done to her was permanent. And it will never go away.

"What's wrong Ben?" his mother asked.

He exhaled and stared at the ceiling to distract himself from breaking into crying. Everything he had — everything he wanted was slipping away. "I love her mom, I really do." He speaks to her as if he was still a child.

She comforts him as all mothers do. She hugs him, soothes him like all mothers do when their children couldn't comprehend loss. "Everything's going to be okay."

"How?" he sobbed into his mother's tiny frame. "It's all my fault. Rey's never going to recover. I brought a son into this world and he's slowly breaking down. Mom he's hurting himself. You killed a man —

it’s all my fault. I don’t know what to do,” he sobbed. “There’s nothing I can do that can ever fix this. Even if I turn myself in, Rey and Benny will never be fixed regardless.”

His mother chuckled.

Ben raised his eyebrows in confusion. She was enjoying his suffering. How could she? When there was a strong chance that they were both going to prison? It all made sense. The way he was, was because of his mother. Do whatever means necessary to protect the ones you love. He breaks away but he doesn’t find content in her mother’s face. He finds peace in his mother, calming peace. She wiped his tears and smiled weakly. “It’s okay Ben. It’s going to be okay. Just trust me.”

“How?” he swallowed. He can’t even think straight. Perhaps he was only imagining things or his mother was in pure denial. She looks so angelic to him right now, he must be losing his mind.

“You love her right?” she wipes his tears. Her touch is light, airy. He sniffles like a little boy. The sound he makes sounds like Benny when he’s crying. Ben hates that sound and heard it too much while Rey and Benny were separated during the investigation. His son’s cries still keep him up at night. His poor twelve year old son, crying to be with his mother.

“Yes,” he doesn’t even need a second to think about it. “I love her mom, I always have and always will.”

His mother nodded.

“Why are you sad mom?” he tilted his head.

“Because you’re sad dear. And Benny, oh Ben,” she touched her son’s face. She’s was crying too at what her son had become. She still loves him. “He takes so much after you,” she murmured. “I know you don’t want to lose him. I know how much you love him and Rey. I know it hurts right now but things will work out. I have hope.” His mother always had hope, even during the darkest of times.

He found himself hyperventilating. “I don’t know what to do, please mom help me.”

“Report it.”

Ben’s eyes flickered. “What?”

“Ben,” she took another step back. “Report it. You can’t go on like this. I can’t let you.”

Did his mother… set him up? He takes a step closer to her but she’s not afraid.

She’s unfazed. Fearless. Despite what her son had become. “The longer you keep stalling, the more it’s going to eat you up on the inside,” his mother whispered.

“Why would you do this?” His hands curled into tight fists and they’re shaking. Anger seethes through his veins at the sight of his mother’s unchanged expression. He wants to wrap his hands around her and *strangle* her.

“Ben,” she repeated herself. She’s not afraid. “Report it.”

Ben raised his right hand in the air.

But he doesn’t strike her.

“You’re not a bad man,” Leia gently takes his hand and holds it. There’s so much strength in her able to tame a beast of his rage. “And you never will be.”

“I’m sorry,” he could barely speak. He’s numb, paralyzed in guilt. He almost attacked his mother. “I’m so far gone mom. I don’t know what to do.”

“But I do,” Leia squeezed his hand. She gives him a smile even though she’s heartbroken in what her son had become.

“What should I do?”

“She’s young. You know you can’t date her.”

“Wait what?”

His mother ignores him and continues on. “She’s a runaway and you know that now. She needs a home. *A family*,” she emphasized. “Guidance. Support. She needs years of therapy. I know you love broken things the way I do sweetheart but she’s so *young*. She has so much to live for. I know you want a life with her but she’s only fifteen.”

“Only fifteen?” he gave his mother a concerned look. “Mom what are you talking about? Are you starting to forget things? Rey is an adult - she’s not fifteen.”

“Ben,” she whispered. “It’s time to wake up.”

“What are you talking about?” he yelled. “Mom —

“Ben, it’s time to wake up.”

The sound of his alarm wakes him up.

It’s piercing. Automatic. It gets louder and louder with each passing second.

Ben grimaces from the light peaking through the cracks of his curtains.

He finds himself sleeping on the keyboard of his laptop. At first the imprint on his face stings but then it fades away once he realized it’s just him in the room. He looked around. There’s no sign of anyone else in this room but him. His heart was racing.

What… what was that?

He stared at his hands until he begins to gather back feeling into his body. He runs to the mirror and observes his face. There is no white in his hair not even gray. There were little traces of lines on his skin of a man about to enter is late twenties and not a man about to enter his forties. He still looks young. Ben looked at his laptop screen then. Rey’s missing file reports were still on his screen from last night. He scans the

lower right corner of his screen and checks the date. He sighed in relief. Thank God. It was 2005 and not 2018.

He paused.

Was all of that… just a dream?

No, it was a nightmare — but it felt *real*.

Ben leaped off his bed and ran to his basement. He turns on the light and finds a cluttered room with piles and piles of boxes and mementos. He inspects it thoroughly, in disbelief that his basement was normal. There's no bathroom in the basement. No bed. No bookshelf. No television set. No AC. No wallpaper. No lock from the outside. Just a cold, dirty basement.

He smiles in relief that he hadn't lost his mind and done such a thing.

It was just a nightmare.

A horrible nightmare.

And yet the smile doesn't last long. The only that lingered was a cruel reality. It was a nightmare and yet a part of him wanted it to be real to some extent. Ben wanted to be with Rey. He wanted to take care of her and love her. He wanted to, had been wanting for the last few months until two weeks ago when he found out why she seemed so familiar to him.

She was a missing a child.

A runaway.

He gasped for air as the confined space of the basement began to suffocate him. He began to pace in the cramped room. Tears were developing and he's trying so hard for them not to come out. He was panicking. He's been having so many panic attacks since he became an FBI agent. It's only been eleven months since he became one and he's already struggling to separate work from personal life.

Benny wasn't real.

And never will be.

In the dream, Benny felt real. Everything in that dream felt *real*. Benny was exactly like him except better. Benny was half of Rey, her features were not prominent in Benny but they were there. Benny had her spirit, her optimism, her fire. Benny was smart and a sweet kid. He adored and worshiped Ben and they shared the love of music together — Ben stopped into place. Benny wasn't real. He should have known it by how perfect Benny was.

Benny was a product of his mind, of what Ben truly wanted. A child that looked exactly like him with minor differences or rather lack of imperfections and in that dream of a nightmare, Benny had a childhood that Ben always wanted to have and also give. Ben should have known it was a dream because Benny's breakdown was a mere mirror of all the times Ben broke down in his youth. As a child Ben self harmed and mutilated himself whenever his parents fought or spent their time separated. It was constant, a vicious cycle and child Ben couldn't comprehend. Ben should have known how eerily parallel Benny's experiences were.

Ben felt his chest constricting as his head was spinning. He sits down on the ground. Tears ran down his cheeks. A part of him wanted it to be real. As demented and twisted as it was, he got to have a life with Rey. A whole life with her. It felt so tangible, the memories it felt honest and absolute. And the love he had for his child that doesn't exist — was *true*.

Ben shut his eyes as he shuddered. He wished with all his life — his whole life that it was true.

Part Two: The Child Who Never Existed

I want you to know that it doesn't matter
Where we take this road, but someone's gotta go
And I want you to know, you couldn't have loved me better
But I want you to move on, so I'm already gone

— Already Gone covered By Sleeping at Last

That beautiful girl that suddenly appeared in the coffee shop a few months ago, he didn't know how old she was.

Ben didn't know who she was either. She constantly gave different names for her coffee orders. Ben wanted to talk to her but she was too good for him. Sometimes, he comes out too strong and he didn't want to give her a wrong impression. He didn't know her age until the time passed and he couldn't stop looking at her. She was beautiful but there was something else about her.

Something familiar. As if he had seen her before. Not in person but in photos.

Ben ended up following her around for a few days until he managed to get a good picture and acquired an empty coffee cup with her DNA to run through the missing persons database. To his dismay, his suspicions were valid and she was in fact familiar. She was a runaway, a missing child. Her name was Rey.

The last name that was given to her was not of her own. Her last name doesn't even matter. The only thing that did was her name, her identity.

She was given away at a young age and was passed around from different foster homes. She ran away when she was thirteen and had been missing for the last two years. It shattered Ben to pieces when he found out her age two weeks ago. He didn't want to believe it.

He wanted her to be older. He didn't want her to have a troubled life. He didn't want her to have gone through trauma.

He wanted to have a chance to be with her but he didn't. Rey was too young and too young to be on her own. She's been living on the streets and he needs to report it. Except for the last two weeks he hasn't. He was hesitant for as selfish as it was, he didn't want to stop seeing her in the coffee shop. Ben doesn't even know her and yet he loved her. *It's impossible to lose someone that you never had*, he reminded himself. *You*

shouldn't have strong feels for someone that you never got to talk to once.

Ben stared at the screen again, reading through her files.

He keeps reading her files as if he did, it'll change.

It won't.

Ben knew that and yet he was hopeful or in denial. Perhaps both. It's crazy and irrational but he loves this girl that he's never had any interaction with. A small part of him wanted to take her in — not kidnap or anything — that's just madness. He wanted to take her in and give her a better life but he can't when he has feelings for her. It wouldn't be ethical at all.

Rey was underage, only a child.

He shouldn't be having feelings for a child — but he didn't know beforehand, he reminded himself. Even if she did want him and reciprocated, he couldn't. Rey was only fifteen. She wasn't mentally or emotionally mature enough. There were limitations for a reason and the last thing he wanted to do was to hurt that beautiful girl.

Ben knows that it's impossible to love someone he's never been with and yet — it felt like he loved her his entire life. He feels like he's known her for a hundred lifetimes. He loves her so much that he would cut a part of himself and give his life for her. If had a choice of spending a life with her or having her be happy, he would sacrifice his own happiness for hers. She's been through so much and yet he knows there's more to it than what is stated in her files.

She's been running from him.

She knows that he knows.

He doesn't want to report it just yet. He wants to have a conversation with her and tell her it's going to be alright. He just wanted to have a

chance to have a goodbye before he never sees her again. This was not his case and he's thankful that it isn't. He's too emotionally attached to her, he's not strong to let her go if she was. He follows her to the gas station bathroom.

When she realizes that she's cornered herself, she lets him in to the bathroom. She's pale and disorientated. "Do you know why I'm here?" he asked gently.

Rey nodded, wiping her eyes. She looks so much of a child when she cries. "Yes," she frowned. Her eyes are bleak. She seems so disorientated. "Please," her voice is breaking. "I don't want to go back."

Ben refrains himself from showing any emotion. She's so lonely and yet so emotionally open. He decides to show her his badge regardless, to assure her that she was safe. This doesn't do anything, she's still afraid of him. He wonders… were there any authority figures besides foster parents that could have possibly abused her? Doctors? Police Officers? Ben's skin tightened. By the way she's flinching, something tells him that the answer is yes. "I don't know you but I know you've gone through a lot."

"Are you —

He shook his head. "I'm not part of your case. You looked familiar and I had to do some research." He watches as she reaches for something. "I'm not going to hurt you," he whispered. "I never will. I called and there will be people to come and get you soon."

"I-I don't -want go go back," she stammered, unable to keep her tone even. "I don't want to get hurt again. I'm so tired." She's crying even more. Ben stops himself from reacting. He can't, if he does he's going to fall apart altogether. He's seen her cry so many times in that dream and yet he wasn't prepared to see her like this. This was real. Her pain was real. And so was his.

"I'm sorry the system's let you down. You have no idea how sorry I am."

“Please, please is there —

He shakes his head firmly. He wishes there was. He wants to hold her but he can’t. It kills him on the inside because she’s searching for comfort but he can’t give it to her. He can’t. “Rey it’s going to be alright. I know it’s hard to believe but there are good people out there in the world.”

“Ben,” she began. Instinctively, he responds to his name. It’s the first time she’s addressed him by his name. She knows his name through all the times she heard the baristas call out his order. “You don’t know what I’ve been though.”

“You’re right. I don’t.”

“Do you want to know why I ran away? What was the final straw?”

Ben doesn’t but he can tell that she wants to tell someone. And so he nods, for her to have some bit of peace.

“My last foster parents were sick,” she spits out in disgust. She’s shaking her head, trying to shake the memories away. “Mr. Davis used to drug me and rape me and Mrs. Davis would just watch. The only reason why I know is sometimes he wanted me to be conscious.”

“I’m sorry.” He doesn’t show any emotion. He can’t if he did he’s going to cry too. He’s so close to crying. He can’t do that, he has to be brave for this girl. And so he masks his emotions and presents himself in an stoic and indifferent demeanor. She was thirteen when she ran away but in her files she was with those foster parents since she was eleven. In that dream of a nightmare he was her first. He knows that he will never be her first but he was hopeful that someone else could. Someone that she wanted.

“I’m so tired. I don’t want to get hurt again.”

“You’ve been running away for two years, I promise you they’ll make sure you won’t get hurt ever again.” They. He keeps referring as they because he doesn’t want to be involved with her case. As if it’ll make the pain any less.

“I don’t — I don’t,” she pauses to gather herself. She’s sobbing again. His hand keeps reaching for her but he stops himself every time. “I don’t want to leave this city. I love this city — I don’t know why,” she smiled through her tears. There was fondness in her tone, a bleak light through all of this. “I don’t know why — I’ve been to so many cities and yet this is my favorite.”

“This city is my favorite too,” he smiled softly. “It’s the atmosphere right? It’s friendly and welcoming.”

Rey wiped her tears with her sleeve. “Yeah,” she said lovingly. “It is. It’s like a place from black and white tv shows, the kind where everyone knows everyone. The kind of place you want to have a family.”

“Yeah. It is,” he paints a smile for her. His heart was breaking and she didn’t even know it was. She doesn’t know the effect she had on him. Ben doesn’t move away from her. He remains transfixed by her face. He wants to never forget how she looks like, this beautiful girl. “But there will be new places for you to find. For you to love. There’s so much for you Rey.”

“I don’t think there is for me. I’m a lost cause. Everyone’s been telling me that my whole life.”

“Well they’re wrong, they’re damn wrong.” It doesn’t occur to Ben how close he was to her face until he felt her eyelash against his skin when she blinked.

“I just want to be lost.”

“Well you can’t,” Ben’s voice cracked. He shook his head furiously. “Not anymore. I already found you and you’ll never be lost again.”

She became silent when she sees his lips tremble. She stared down at the door and sees red and blue lights flicker through the cracks. Rey frowned at the sight. She was already gone. There was no where she could run anymore. “I will never see you again, will I?”

“Most likely not. The world is big and the system’s going to make sure you have a wonderful family this time. It won’t let you down. Not

again." He refers the whole process so simply to her but he knows that she was well informed about it. She knows the system and all the branches.

Her face fell. "I wished I knew this was going to happen. If I did I would have gather the courage to talk to you. I know it sounds silly but you're one of my favorite people even though we never had a chance to interact."

"It's not silly, not at all," he means every single word. He knows the way she looks at him when she thinks he wasn't noticing. She looks at him the way he looked at her, with longing and fascination. They were both shy to do anything, it was for the best. He's happy that nothing had happened between them but sadness overshadows it. Of what could have been.

"I know you can't hug me and it's okay." She hugs him as tight as she could — as much as her little arms could wrap around him. Ben remains still as he tries to hold on to this fleeting moment. He wished that this moment could last forever. She's going to be gone soon. Her touch feels like it does in that dream, but somehow even better — beyond his expectations. It's electrifying. Tender. Lingering. He aches to bury himself in her chest. If only he met her three years later when she was eighteen. He could have pursued her, maybe even have a life together if she wanted.

She's pressed against his body that he can hear her heartbeat. It's much softer and delicate than he had imagined it to be. If he could, he would kiss her. Hold her. Cradle her in his arms. He pulls away and stares at her. Her confusion washes away when she realizes he was memorizing every inch of her of her face. Every freckle. Every little scar. She hovers close. She wants to be remembered by him always.

"Will you remember me?"

"Always." Ben looked at the ground. Benny wasn't real and never will be. Ben knows that he will move on and have children of his own

but they will never look like her. She will never be the mother of his children.

“I will never forget you.”

“I will never forget you,” he responds back.

If he could, he would love her beyond his lifetime. Even in death. When Rey’s ready, he walks her out of the bathroom. Guides her. She’s afraid of it, the unknown — what will come for her and so he keeps a positive and upbeat demeanor for her. She needs it. But as they head out from the safeness of the small space they are not welcomed by darkness but blinding lights.

Red and blue lights danced across their skins as they walked forward into the warm light.

He goes with her and answers any further questions before being released hours later. He doesn’t get home until the next morning. He doesn’t feel sleepy at all. It’s hard to sleep when he knows that after a couple more meetings and interviews, he’s never going to see her again. And that last night was the last time. He should be happy but he was human.

Ben decides to call his mother. His mother should be awake by now. It was nine am.

“Ben?” his mother yawned.

He clutched on to the phone. The sound of her voice soothes him.

“What’s wrong sweetheart?”

“Mom,” he began. His voice is already uneven. “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t, this work isn’t for me.”

“But sweetheart you worked so hard. For so many years — you just got the job not too long ago, literally not even a whole year yet —

“I know,” he sighed. “I know I thought I wanted this but I don’t. I can’t handle the stress. I get too emotionally invested. It’s tearing me apart. I’ve been stressed out over a girl who wasn’t even part of my case Mom. I can’t, I’m sorry. I feel like if I keep going on I’m going to lose myself.” Ben paused. He’s not sure if he’s afraid of becoming emotionless or too emotional. “I’m sorry I wasted your and dad’s money.”

“Oh Benny,” she purses her lips. “Please don’t cry, you’re going to make me cry.”

He reached to touch his cheek. He didn’t even know he was crying. He hasn’t heard his mother refer to the nickname she had called him before he gone through puberty and grown too tall to be called such a same. His heart skipped a beat in pain of the loss for the child that never existed.

“Don’t worry about money. I understand but what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to quit,” he blinked several times. He’s trying to register his own words into his system. It was going to be a process in itself to quit. It’s not going to be just a two weeks notice and that was it. It was going to be weeks, maybe a few months. “I’ll pick up a job or two. I’ll figure it out. I just know I can’t go on like this.”

“If you need anything, let me know.”

Ben nodded. “I love you.”

“I love you too.”

His childhood friend stops by the next week. Ben and him had been friends since birth for their mothers had been lifelong friends. He was Ben’s best friend, the person he could always confide to. His friend takes him out to a restaurant, to get Ben to eat. Ben hasn’t been eating much. “Thank you,” he said as he stared at the full plate.

His friend frowned sympathetically. “It’s not a problem just please try to take a couple of bites.”

“Poe.”

“Yeah buddy?”

Ben saw right through his best friend’s easy going façade. “I know my mother wants you to try to change my mind. I’m not.” He shook his head. He watches as Poe’s façade fades away. “I’m not going to continue with that field of work,” Ben answers, being discrete for they were out in public.

“Give yourself some time before you make a big decision like that. Maybe you need a break. Maybe go on vacation —

“I already made up my mind,” Ben said calmly. “I’m not capable. The longer I stay the more I fear I’m going to have a breakdown.”

Poe searches in his mind for the right words, for a counter answer but he finds nothing. He sees that Ben had made up his mind and wasn’t going to change it. “I understand. I’m sorry you have to go through this. This was what you waned to be your whole life. Ever since we were little kids.”

Ben nodded, staring bleakly at the food before him. “I know. I feel like I wasted my life.”

“You haven’t,” Poe says without a second thought. “It happens. That sometimes the things you want in life don’t turn out to be what you wanted.” Poe sighed and took a sip of his drink. “But you’re smart and you are driven, you will figure it out and things will be fine in the end.”

“I scheduled myself my first therapy session for next week. I think I’m depressed.”

Poe bit his lip and tried not to show any trace of worry. He remained calm because he knows Ben and Ben needed something to lift his spirits. “That’s good. You’re doing what you need to get better. It’s going to take time but it’s all going to work out.”

Ben doesn’t eat anything at all. Poe asks the waiter for a box and pays the bill. When they get inside the car is when Ben decides to speak again. “I had a dream not too long ago,” Ben murmured, staring at the blank space.

Poe was about to start the car. “About?” he raised his eyebrow. Ben doesn’t seem to be mentally here. Poe turns on the AC for them. Poe sense it’s going to be a long conversation.

Ben’s hands curled into tight fists. He knows he’s not allowed to discuss work but he needs to. Perhaps if he did it’ll set him free. And so Ben tells Poe more about the girl, the girl that Ben had talked so much about before finding out who she was. He hasn’t given Poe the update.

“I’m so sorry. I know it hurts right now but you’ll find someone else. I know it doesn’t feel like you will but there are so many people out there.”

“I had a dream,” Ben’s voice is shaking. He brings them back to the conversation that he wanted to have. “It was a nightmare. I kidnapped her and kept her in my basement. I took advantage of her and we had a boy. His name was Benny.”

Poe couldn’t help but to smile because Ben truly looks happy. “I haven’t heard that name in such a long time.” Before Ben hit puberty, Poe was the tallest.

“Benny was amazing. The son everyone wants. He listened and he was funny and he was smart. He had so many friends and of course he took after me and was a wise ass and stubborn,” Ben laughed quietly at the memory. “He adored me and loved me and he took so much after me. All the bad things I didn’t like myself, he was given the traits of her. He had her button nose instead of mine,” Ben chuckled but it was hallow. “He had her spirit. Her optimism. Her blind hope in everything. He saw the good in everyone. And he was such a good kid. He loved his parents very much even when he was struggling with growing up.”

Poe tries to keep up with an agreeable façade but he can’t when Ben’s speaking so fondly of something that wasn’t real. “Sounds quite a

dream.”

“It was a dream, an absurd over the top dream,” he laughed bitterly. “I should have known it was a dream when I was experiencing it. You were there but we didn’t know each other in that world. You were an FBI agent and she was your case.”

“What really?” Poe was unable to suppress his laugh. Poe knows he should take this seriously but the dream sounded so absurd. “I’m sorry -I didn’t mean to be insensitive -it’s just — so silly.”

“You were still a pilot. You were a lot of things actually. You were an inventor. You made droids and also you were Benny’s teacher. It sounds even more ridiculous describing it.”

“I’m just a pilot,” he reminded him. Poe was never good with school, it was a miracle he passed his exams and graduated.

“I know, I can differentiate reality and dreams. You were looking for Rey and you almost came close to until my mother took you out.” Ben was the one to laugh hysterically. He should have known he was experiencing a dream. It was too fantastical. “It sounds so ridiculous explaining it.”

“Sounds like an eventful, action packed dream.” Poe paused. “You’re nervous again.”

Ben went silent and stared at his hands. He was biting his fingernails. He didn’t even notice. Ben yanked his fingers from his mouth and rested them on his lap. It doesn’t stop Ben from shaking though. “As horrible as it may be, a part of me wished it was real.”

Poe’s face softened as he felt Ben’s loneliness fill the tiny space of the car. The loneliness devours Poe’s spirits and leaves him to experience his friend’s loss. His friend was mourning for a life he never had and for a boy that never existed. Ben was never ever going to have a life with that girl. She was far too lost, far too mentally and emotionally scarred, beyond repair. Poe frowned at the tragedy of it all for Ben couldn’t see it.

Ben was looking through things through rose colored glasses. “You’re not a bad person,” Poe stated.

“I feel like I am.”

“You’re not a pedophile. You didn’t know her age and once you found out she was a teenager, you didn’t act on it. You’re not the people that you fight against.”

“I took two weeks to report that I found her,” Ben swallowed hard. “What does that say about me?”

“That you’re human. That nothing’s ever black and white.”

“I spent those two weeks thinking of another way. I wanted her to stay. I wanted to help her — I wanted to be with her.”

“I know you liked her a lot.”

“I love her.”

You don’t love her Ben, Poe wanted to say. *You don’t even know her — you just love the idea of her and fixing someone.* But Poe knows not to. He knows that Ben needed comfort, needed someone to listen. “It’s common to develop feelings for someone that —

“But she wasn’t my case. I liked her before I knew.”

Poe nodded. “I know. I’m sorry.” Ben had spent the last few months telling Poe about the girl and every time Poe would try to convince him to speak to her. Ben never did, was far too insecure to. Some things happen for a reason. It was for the best that Ben never did anything. There was no future for Ben with this girl. Ben would have ended up taking care of her for the rest of her life.

They are left with the quietness of the car.

The only sound that was heard was of melancholy.

Rey is gone. Had been for the last seven months.

It hurts to be in the coffee shop when she's not around. The place is not the same without her presence. So Ben doesn't go there anymore. The place has so many memories and it haunts him now. He should have gathered the courage to talk to her — to get to know her during the months she was here. But maybe it was for the best. He would certainly fall in love with her and it would have been so much harder to let her go.

He's been working two minimum wage jobs to make ends meet. He doesn't know what to do. He does have a degree but he wants to stray away from work that was similar. He has enough money saved for a two years worth for tuition for a state college at most. For now he wants to enjoy life and explore his options in careers before jumping back in school.

He's been going through therapy to cope with everything. Searching for a different career path. Struggling with PTSD. Trying to overcome his depression. He misses her, misses her more as the time goes on.

Ben's in the process of selling his house. There was no need for him to have a house when it was just him. Besides it'll be handy to have extra money when everything was so uncertain. Selling the house doesn't help him at all. Ever so often he keeps thinking about that dream he had all those months ago. This was supposed to be the place he and Rey raised their son. The child that never existed and never will be.

Ben knows that the dream was more of a nightmare but he doesn't acknowledge the demented side of it.

He thinks about the bright things in the dream. He thinks about being a dad to Benny Solo. Thinks about them playing Buddy Holly and them trying to make breakfast for Rey for Mother's day. He thinks about taking Rey away from her situation. He thinks about taking his little family to the snow. Or that tender moment they during their first New Year's Eve.

He knows that his dream wasn't what he subconsciously wanted to do to Rey, as his psychiatrist explains. The basement represented a safe

place for not just for his feelings but his want to keep them both protected from the world. The darkness to the dream was mixed in with his own fears of becoming one of the people he used to fight against and guilt for not reporting it right away. His psychiatrist reassures him that his feelings were not wrong since Ben didn't know her age and didn't act upon his it once he found out. His therapist explains it was common for people to develop an attachment to cases.

It still didn't make the situation any better.

He knows there's something wrong with him for missing someone that he's never been with. To be reminded once a while of the dream of a life he will never have.

He knows it will take time.

It feels like forever.

Pick it up, pick it all up
And start again
You've got a second chance
You could go home
Escape it all
It's just irrelevant

It's just medicine
It's just medicine

You could still be
What you want to
What you said you were
When I met you

— Medicine by Daughter

Part Three: Happiness is a Butterfly

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Happiness is a butterfly
Try to catch it like every night
It escapes from my hands into moonlight
Every day is a lullaby

Happiness is a butterfly
We should catch it while dancing
I lose myself in the music, baby
Every day is a lullaby
Try to catch it like lightning

— Happiness is a Butterfly by Lana Del Rey

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Twelve Years Later

Ben remembers the last time he saw her.

He remembers it vividly even after all these years.

Before he walked her out of the bathroom, he looked at her for a long time. He wanted to remember her, to never forget how she looked like. That was years ago, more than a decade. He's moved around a lot and traveled and somehow ended up living in New York. He's been living here for the last five years, he now works as a software developer for a major company and on his spare time he does freelancing, mainly web design for upcoming businesses.

Ben always liked working with computers, always enjoyed deciphering codes and overriding programs.

Life is great. He lives comfortably and has a decent amount of free time to explore and read. He has a nice apartment and he has a stray black cat for a pet that comes and goes. He's still to his mother's dismay, not married yet. He's thirty eight and he's well aware that he should settle down but he doesn't want to settle with just anyone. He's been dating for the last eleven years, had a few serious girlfriends in that time frame but none he could see being together for the rest of his life.

Ben's been in love before but it didn't compare to how he felt about Rey. He loved her but he had to let her go. He knows deep down that he shouldn't be comparing his relationships with how felt about her. Rey was an idea, an unrealistic expectation. He knows this but subconsciously he thinks about her. He hopes that wherever she is, she was happy. He hopes that she's living the best of her life. He hopes that she's the person she wants to be and she's with someone who loves her. He wants nothing but happiness for her.

He takes a sip of his coffee as he sketched some web layout ideas for a client.

"Ben?"

Instinctively he responded. He flinched at the woman standing in front of him. She's standing too close, much to his dismay. He likes his personal space. "How can I help you?" he asked, trying to be polite. He keeps his eyes on his tablet, barely acknowledging the woman. He hates when people try to strike a conversation with him. He was trying to work. He wasn't here to socialize. He blinked — wait. How did she know his name? He pulled his eyes from the screen and looked at her. He raised his eyebrow. "Who are you? How do you know my name?" he demanded.

The woman blinked. "I'm not sure if you remember me but you helped me years ago — I'm Rey if that helps."

Ben examined her features. He sees her smile and it register to him then. He doesn't recognize her at all. She doesn't seem to mind at all for it had been twelve years. A naïve part of his mind still remembered her

as a teenager. That dream he had all those years ago, he imagined her how would she looked when she was older but not like this. She was prettier than he could ever imagine, she looks her age and not in his dream where she still looked like a teenager. “Rey?” he knows that smile anywhere. But her smile is different, it’s brighter. He hugs her without thinking, nearly scoops her up. He puts her down when he senses her being startled. “What are you doing here— how have you been?” he immediately pulls the chair for her.

“I just moved into this city last week with my boyfriend — I mean fiancé,” she laughed. She covered her mouth with her hand in embarrassment from the slip of the tongue. “It’s all still new. I’m still getting used to calling him that.”

Ben stiffened but he forces himself to smile. He stared at her finger. She has a ring. The ring isn’t much but she’s pleased regardless. She’s young and she’s in love. “Congrats. I’m so happy for you. How long have guys been together?”

“About two years. He’s amazing.”

“What’s his name?” He tries not to look sad but it’s difficult not to be. Ben doesn’t want to be sad. He wants to be happy for her.

“Daniel.” She pulls out her phone and shows him a picture. He sees her beam and this time, he smiles with her. He wants her to be happy. Rey deserved to be happy, that’s all he wanted for her.

“You guys make a cute couple. How’ve you been? Tell me what have you been up to for the last twelve years.”

“It’s kind of a long story.” Rey laughed. Ben melts at the sound. He didn’t realize how much he missed hearing her laugh. He hasn’t forgotten how her eyes smiled with her or how striking she looked in white. She was wearing a white dress with a tan colored knit cardigan.

“I don’t mind.”

“Well I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours afterwards.”

Ben laughed. “There’s nothing much to me.”

“I beg to differ,” she laughed. “You were working for the FBI last time I saw you.”

“Used to,” he chuckled warily.

Rey blinked several times. “What happened?”

“I resigned. It was too much for me.”

“I understand.”

“It’s fine. I’m a software programmer now. I’m happy that it didn’t work out. I’ve been traveling around here and there and that’s pretty much it —

“Are you married?”

He tried to smile but couldn’t. “No but I’m fine. I’ve been dating here and there but right now I’m fine. How about you?”

“I got adopted by the sweetest woman,” she said with awe. “Her name is Maz Kanata. I even took her last name. I’m planning to getting my last name hyphened because I want to keep it.” She pulls out her phone and shows a photo of her and her mother. Maz was short, reached about Rey’s chest. The woman was older, probably even older than his mother. Maz had so many wrinkles lacing her small circular face and seemed very warm in her knitted beanie and cardigan.

“Rey Kanata? I liked that very much.”

Rey smiled even wider. “Ben she’s honestly the most precious human ever!” There was adoration in her tone. “I miss her so. I didn’t think I would ever get adopted at the age I was. Most adults see teenagers as tuition bills but she didn’t. She took me in. That’s the one thing I hate about moving here. I’m far away from her but I’m planning to call her every day and visit her once a month. She’s so sweet, she even pulled money from her savings to let me study abroad in college.”

Ben perked up. He feels so proud of her. She went to college and she got the experience to travel. “You got to study abroad? Where did you go?” He couldn’t help but to look at the girl. She’s grown up to be even more beautiful. He didn’t think it was possible.

“England, France, Italy, and Greece. I still can’t believe I got the opportunity to go. It was so expensive. I didn’t even ask but she saw the flyer on my desk and her little mind decided to do something.”

“Well I’m glad you did. That’s something you’re going to cherish forever.” He paused and smiled to himself. He can tell she already does. “What did you major?”

“Mechanical engineering.”

“Really?” Ben can’t stop smiling. She was on his mind for the first few years and he constantly wondered what kind of person she would be. What she became was beyond what he imagined her to be. Rey was glowing and possessed such confidence about herself that he’s never seen before. She seems so much at peace with herself.

“I didn’t even know I wanted to do that until I got enrolled to my high school. My high school counselors were really nice and they helped me figure what I wanted to do and helped me with my college applications — what why do you keep smiling goofily like that?”

“You have no idea how proud I am and grateful that you got to have the life you deserved.” Ben pursed his lips and tries to hold himself from feeling sentimental. She was a little girl when he last saw her and now she’s grown up. She’s everything that he hoped her to be but didn’t think it was possible after all that she went through.

“I wouldn’t have if it wasn’t for you. I should be the one thanking you.” She wiped her tears with her sleeve. She started to laugh and for some reason so did he. They didn’t know why they were laughing perhaps it was relief.

They talked for hours in the coffee shop until it was time for the shop to close for the night. He didn’t know that time had passed, it felt only a

minute talking to her. He wished it could last forever. Rey's witty and clever, cunning with a sharp tongue. He hasn't laughed in what felt like a long time. He thought he had been happy for the last few years but it doesn't compare anymore when he was with her.

He can't help but to wonder if they would have these types of conversations years ago. Ben knows deep down they wouldn't. They were completely different people all those years ago.

He knows that they have to go. The shop was closing but he takes his time to pack up his things. He's not meant to be in her life but he wish he could. There was no place for him and yet she's writing something on a napkin. "Here's my number," she tells him. "Text me so I can have yours. I want to treat you to lunch."

Ben's skin tightened as she hands him the slip of paper. "No — you don't have to." The thin sheet of paper feels heavy in his hand. He knows he can't be in her life. It will hurt too much.

Rey shook her head. "It's the least I can do for what you've done for me. I don't think I would have survived any longer if you didn't notice me all those years ago."

He swallows his hesitation and nods. She's looking at him as if he was the only person in the world. Of course he couldn't say no. "Alright."

OoOoOo

Ben has always loved her and always will.

It's more transparent now that he gets to talk to her. It scares him how even after all these years, his heart still beats for her. She's a different person than who she was before but her soul was the same and so was his. He still looks at her the way he used to all those years ago. In want. In fascination. He's drawn to her after all this time. He didn't think it was possible.

She's everything he wanted. Always was and always will. It's bittersweet.

When they're talking, it's natural. She knows him the way no one does. He can be himself with her. He's not the same either but it doesn't matter to her. She welcomes him in. It makes him think what could have been. He thinks they could have been happy but if he didn't report her missing she would never have gotten the life that she has now.

They were just friends.

They have a distance between them when they spoke. They only spent time together in public areas: coffee shops, restaurants, and bookstores. He respects her relationship and respects her.

But it wasn't enough. A part of him wants to stop seeing her. It hurts too much sometimes to be around her, to know that in only a matter of a few months that she's going to marry the man she loved. Rey really loved Daniel. She gave herself time before dating. She didn't start to date until she was twenty two, giving herself seven years to grow and heal. Daniel is her third boyfriend and is the one. Ben's thankful that she allowed herself to date around and not give her heart to the first man that showed her kindness.

He doesn't know how to go about it, ending his friendship with that beautiful girl.

Ben wants to be around her still — he feels as if his soul is connected to hers. It's getting more difficult to be around her, to see her slowly plan her wedding but he doesn't want to lose her again.

Rey was already gone the night he walked her out of the gas station bathroom, he reminded himself. She was already gone when her face appeared on the missing persons database. Gone was any chance of anything between them. She was never his to begin with. Ben know he can't continue a friendship with her. He still loved her and he needs to live his own life. He wants someone that he can spend the rest of his life with. He wants to be a father.

And it's never going to be Rey.

It was never meant to be.

Ben stared at his phone. It was New Year's Eve. He was supposed to be at his mother's party but it's been snowing for the past week. All flights were cancelled. He was supposed to be at his mother's house five days ago and not be stuck in his apartment in New York. His mother understood though and tells him to enjoy the evening regardless. The day was still young but he had no plans whatsoever. All of his friends had plans with their loved ones while his family lived in a different state. His stray cat hasn't been around in the last few days either, perhaps somewhere else to hide from the cold.

Ben sighed and fumbled with his TV for something to watch.

It was too much of a hassle to go out with all this snow. He reminds himself that this was a blessing. He doesn't have to deal with his dad getting stupid drunk and seeing his parents fight in public like they do every year.

His phone rings. He lets it go to voicemail. His phone rings again. He grumbled and forces himself to answer. He blinked as he read the caller id. Rey. He hesitates to answer. He hasn't been responding to her calls or texts for the last week. His phone goes to voicemail again.

His heart skipped a beat.

And his phone rings again.

"Hello?" he finally answered.

"Hi." Her voice was high pitched.

"Hey."

Silence.

"Are you doing anything today?"

"No," he answers without taking time to process her words. "I'm just going to be home the whole day."

"Can I come over?"

Ben blinked. She's never been to his place before. She's never asked to be at his place and he never invited her. It was inappropriate. "What's wrong?"

"It's a lot but it's better if I tell you in person."

"Aren't you supposed to be going out with your fiancé?" It was New Year's Eve after all.

"Ben," she calls his name.

He became quiet. He can feel the world on her shoulders for it was spilling on to his. He wants to say no to her but he can't. All he ever wanted was to give that beautiful girl everything. "I'll text you my address," is the last thing he tells her on the phone.

The wait was excruciatingly long. Time didn't seem to move at all. It was worse with the weather, the roads were all backed up.

It gives him time to prepare himself at least.

OoOoOoO

Ben remembers the time he saw Rey truly happy all those years ago.

He had happened to be in the same place, same time as her. They were in the bookstore. He kept his distance from her for he didn't want her to assume he was following her. It started to rain and like a child she was, she ran out. He watched her through the clear windows of the store as the little girl danced and giggled in the rain. He couldn't look away. He was amazed by her boldness, how unashamed she was to be herself out of the open.

Her happiness was only brief.

For all moments of happiness were fleeting.

And then they were gone.

If he could, he would give her the rain. He would give it to her in a small cloud so she can have it always.

Snow covers her hair like white crystals. Her hair looks golden in the light and her eyes were a spring green. Her cheeks are rosy, her lips were bruised and kissed by the cold. “Hi,” she breathed, clinging on to her coat.

“Hi.” His eyes flickered as her teeth chattered. She was all covered up in a sweater, coat, gloves, scarf, and hat but she was shivering. He lets her in to his apartment that was meant for only one. The heater is on and she sheds off the layers and kicks off her boots. She’s left in a burgundy sweater and black pants.

He forgets how slim she is. How tiny her figure was.

Ben keeps his distance from her. He lets her sit on the couch while he made her some hot tea. “I could have gone to you,” he reminded her. He hands her the cup but she sets it down immediately.

“I broke up with Daniel a few days ago,” she said quietly as the mug clinked. “I’m still packing my things. I’m staying over a friend’s apartment until I find another place to stay.”

Ben frowned. “Why? What happened?”

“Ben,” her tone was firm. “You already know.”

Ben shook his head as he swallowed hard. “I don’t. Tell me what happened.”

“He saw how I was when you weren’t responding to my messages. He told me that I couldn’t be friends with you anymore and so I broke it off.”

“Why? Rey, Rey you love him.”

“I don’t want to have a life without you in it.”

“I’m sorry. It’s going to take some time but you’re going to find someone that won’t be threatened by our friendship. That won’t put you in that position of choosing.”

“I don’t want anyone else. I want you.”

“You don’t mean that.”

“I do.” She locked her gaze on him the way he did all those years ago. As if she wanted to remember him always.

“You don’t,” he emphasized. His jaw twitched. He tries to focus on anything but her but can’t. She’s looking at him and he wants to be her main focus. He wants to look at her always. “You just broke up with your fiancé. You’re not thinking clearly.” He can’t. He knows he can’t. It’s not ethical. She went through so much and only wants hi because he was the first one who cared. He wasn’t working on her case but he was involved. He couldn’t.

“You’re giving me the same look,” she frowned. Her eyes flickering. Flickering away the sad memories. Rey tries not to think about it the way he does. “From that night.”

Ben doesn’t say a word.

So she does. “I know how much it was hurting you that you couldn’t show any emotion.” He was still standing and so she stood to face him. Rey tilts her head up and subconsciously, he lowered himself to meet her gaze once more. He doesn’t seem to notice that he did that. “You have no idea how much I wanted to tell you that night to run away with me,” her voice lowered as his eyes widened. “But we both knew you already called the police and they were waiting for us to come out.”

“Don’t,” he warned, voice breaking. Don’t. Don’t make the pain even worse. “You can’t keep looking back.” He says this her and him. Ben spent so many years trying to forget about her but he doesn’t think he can.

“I know you would have said no.”

Ben nodded in agreement. “It wouldn’t be right.”

“I know,” she sighed. “I didn’t want you to get in trouble — for your life to be over. But I still see it in your eyes that you would if you could. The hardest thing about leaving that city was leaving you.”

“Stop saying things like that!” he yelled. She’s crying as she’s speaking to him and it only agitates him. “Letting you go was the hardest thing I had to do. You don’t know how many years it took for me to get over you,” he said bitterly. There’s anger in his tone, anger that stunned him. He didn’t know why there was. She’s done nothing wrong and yet she was the reason for all of his sorrows.

“You don’t know how many years it took for me to get over you either!” she yelled back. “You think that you’re the only one who suffered? You were the first person that gave a damn about me and the first boy I liked and I couldn’t even see you.”

“You had a great life Rey!” he shouted. He doesn’t feel any sympathy for her. “Don’t tell me that you fucking suffered! I gave you that life knowing that I couldn’t be in it.” Ben exhaled deeply as tears clouded his vision. “I did knowing it will kill me,” his voice lowered. He can see his reflection through her, his face was red and swollen. Just like hers. “I wanted to have a life with you.”

There was silence.

He never moved on.

Ben pretended for so many years that he actually believed it.

But he never moved on.

“I wanted the same thing too,” Rey said quietly.

“You were too young. You were still a child.” Ben spent so many years feeling guilty for what he felt for Rey. All of his therapists told him it wasn’t attraction or romantic but an emotional attachment. They told him it wasn’t love but he’s standing before her and it feels like damn love. He could tell she was feeling the same thing for the past twelve years. It doesn’t comfort him at all.

He can’t love her.

“Go back to him Rey,” he whispered. “You love him. I know you do.” It hurts ever fiber of his being but he doesn’t want her to throw what she

had with her fiancé. She spent two years of her life with her fiancé.

Rey shook her head. She looks so much of a frightened little girl. If he could, he would hold her and tell her it was going to be alright. “I believe that things happen for a reason,” she began. She breaks the space between them and touches his cheek. Ben stopped breathing for a moment for she took his breath away. “I know it means something for me to find you after all these years in a coffee shop again.”

His hand is over her hand now.

And they both didn’t know if he was going to pull her hand away or not. The small exchange of affection from her startles him. It felt like electricity. It wakes him as if he hadn’t been alive for the last decade.

Rey’s looking at him in such tender manner. His hand is still over hers, over the hand that was touching his cheek. “How do you explain all those years ago?” he countered.

“It was the wrong time but it was meant to happen. You are much happier now and so am I.”

“I think we were meant to find each other again only to know that the other was doing just fine.” He pulls her hand away from his face. And yet he lingers closer. It hurts to be close because it was too tempting but it feels the same all those years ago. Like the last time he’s going to see her. “We’re meant to be platonic. We’re only meant to cross paths whenever it’s needed for the other to grow.”

And yet… he’s gravitating towards her. He doesn’t notice it until there was a breath of space separating them apart. The space was thin and yet far at the same time. Hands find each other without breaking their eye contact. Their fingers lace to one another, latching on and not letting go. They respond both so well, as if they were supposed to be linked. Ben can’t remember the last time holding hands could be so intimate. He’s not sure who was first — if it was her to initiate or him. “What makes you so afraid of loving me?” she whispered.

“I fear you love me for all the wrong reasons. That I’m just an idea, Rey an unrealistic expectation,” it pains him to say this for he knew there was truth to it. “I’m not going to live up to all the expectations you have about me. You only love me because I’m the one who saved you.”

“Ben I loved you before that, before any of it.”

“You were too young to know what love was.”

“Doesn’t mean my feelings didn’t have any value. I looked at you the way you looked at me. You never noticed all the times I buried my smile behind a book when I saw you come in the coffee shop. We didn’t speak but being in the same room as you was enough for me,” she squeezed his hands. “What happened to me will always be a part of me but it doesn’t mean I’m broken or incapable of love. Time has passed. I’ve grown and I know what love is.”

“What if how we feel about each other is unhealthy?”

“Well people always do have a knack for wanting things and people that aren’t good for them. I was going to marry someone that I thought I loved because everyone told me he was the one. And I believed it because I wanted it to be true. And for that time with Daniel I believed I was happy until you came back into my life. I left him so easily from the idea of not being able to talk to you again.”

She’s staring at his mouth and he senses it. Her cheeks are flushed but not from the cold this time.

“I won’t be able to please you,” he said feebly, staring at her lips in return. He contains himself, using all his strength to do so — to cage his desires and yearning. If he kissed her, he knows he won’t be able to satisfy her. He’ll only disappoint this beautiful girl.

“How so?” she asked.

Ben lets go her hands and she pulls away. Her fingers don’t rest back at her sides and instead find a place in his hair. He winces from her touch. She’s staring at him attentively, fingers still. Waiting for an answer. “I’ll bore you,” he whispered. He’s so undeserving of any ounce

of affection from this beautiful girl and yet she's giving it to him. And greedily he takes it, he's been starved from her for twelve years. Her fingers run along his temples and then his cheeks, her eyes are running back and forth every imperfection of his. As if she wanted to remember him always.

"You will get tired of me," he murmured. "I will disappoint you."

"If all those things are true, I want them," Rey insisted. Her fingers are in his hair as her lips kissed everything she could reach. His nose. His jaw. His cheeks. "I want to be bored by you. I want to be tired of you. I want to be disappointed by you," Rey chuckled faintly. "I want even all the things you hate about yourself. I just want you. Isn't that what love is?"

His eyes flickered as he swallowed the lump in his throat. "Yes," he responded. "That's what love is." There's no sign that she's disillusioned. She knows what love is. Love wasn't perfect. Love wasn't always romantic and pretty. It was vulnerable and weak. Love was selfless. Endless. Love is real and what he was feeling was love. And Ben knows as she's kissing his temples that he cannot pull away. He's not capable. He wants to be touched by her always. Never has he felt so alive. "Can I kiss you?" he rasped, unable to keep his voice even. Her touch was sweet and warming, melting and healing away all the cancers he possessed.

"Yes," she nodded. There was something striking about the way she nodded. There was confidence and self assurance in herself and there was trust and faith in him. Ben loves her — who she was and who she is, and who she will be. Maybe this time in her next phase of life that there is a place for him.

He's cautious.

Ben's fingertips brush against her cheek and traces down to the corner of her mouth. His touch is light, leaving paint strokes of where he would liked to kiss. His fingers find trail down to stroke her chin and then circle its way to her throat. A blush develops across her cheeks and it makes him recall to all those years ago. There's still innocence in her regardless

of everything. With everything that has happened, she was still Rey. And nothing could ever take that light that was in her. He lowers himself again to have his lips meet with hers. He's careful, restrains himself to be slow with this beautiful girl.

Ideally he would want to wait a while to kiss her. He would want to date her a bit first before doing this but it's hard to follow when you feel the time that had been lost. They could have met when it was too late and their lives were entwined with someone else. His hands find her waist and pulls her close to him in such a haste as if he will never have this opportunity again.

Everything was still unknown about their future.

This could last only for a night. Or this could last only for a few years. Or maybe forever. They could be meant to be. They also couldn't. There were so many possibilities laid out in the open — so many roads and yet all was unknown. An image looms in Ben's mind of the boy who never existed. Ben hasn't thought about the boy in about eight years. Even if they had children, Ben knows that the boy would never exist. They could have all girls for all Ben knew. They could have all boys as well. Even if they by chance had just one boy, it wouldn't be the child that Ben had dreamed about all those years ago. Even if they named their would be son Benny, it wouldn't be the child who never existed. For once Ben is thankful that Benny never existed. If Benny existed it meant he was brought into the world in such a dark manner — even if it was through much kinder terms, bringing a child when Rey was a child and not ready wasn't the best for anyone. If they had a child, their child will never have the life Benny had. And yet regardless of the life Benny was given, Benny remained a boy with relentless love and spirit.

It was bittersweet but Ben sees now that Benny was never meant to exist.

You can't control life. You can't control what happens.

The only thing you can do was to live. If it's meant to be, it will be. Ben peppers soft kisses on her throat. She moans into the air, into the

quietness of it all. It was by far the sweetest sound he had ever heard. Maybe life wanted them to meet and spend those twelve years apart so they can become perfect for one another. She helped him get out of a life that he thought he wanted and he gave her the life she deserved. They both had time apart to get the help they need and had experiences beyond each they were supposed to meet at such an early stage of time so they know what they who they were waiting for. It was worth the wait. All of it. Ben kisses her harder as his hands were all over her, searching for a way to latch on to her. She reciprocates his affections and he's consumed with joy that he's smiling as they kiss. This must be what happiness feels like. He can't recall having any of his darkest moments.

Ben embraces her and holds her the way she's meant to be held. To be protected. Cherished. They stay like this for a while. Ben's not sure of their future but he wants to savor this moment. Make the best of it. He has to give themselves a try. Ben pulls away and presses a soft kiss on her forehead. "Go put on your coat," he tells her. He runs to his bedroom to retrieve his coat as well.

"Why?" she grinned. "Where are we going?"

Ben returns back to her, hastily buttoning up his coat and wrapping a scarf around his neck. He paused and thought about it for a while. "I-I don't know to be honest," he laughed. Ben feels so out of his body, so giddy and deliriously energetic. "But it's New Year's Eve. We should do something together. There's so many things we can do. We can go to our favorite places or somewhere new — we can even go to Times Square if you want."

"We can go anywhere. Anywhere we want," Rey smiled at the idea. It sounded so romantic, going where their hearts tell them to go.

Rey watches as he's frantically unbuttoning his coat and pulling over another sweater over his body. He's pulling socks on as he's stumbling and sliding to get his phone. He crashes into his book shelf. Rey couldn't help but to laugh. There was something endearing about the way Ben was acting, in a way that she's never seen. He's usually so reserved and

organized. She's never seen this side of him — spontaneous and just so animated.

"We don't even need to have a destination," she suggests, trying to put him back to earth. He's fluttery and almost flying. It was a beautiful sight. She's never seen him so happy. "We can just enjoy the journey."

Once they were layered up, they head out of his apartment hand in hand. There's not as much snow now. The roads are clearer. They don't know where they are. They don't know what's going to happen between them. Everything was still so unknown. Nobody knows if this will last but she feels with all her heart that it will. She stares at him as he searches for their Uber. His expression is stern as his eyes are wide and alert. She likes that about Ben. He's observant than most people. He's caring and selfless. He's older but he's like a little boy, with stars in his eyes and his heart on his sleeve. He looks so adorable all bundled up in layers and his cheeks and the tip of his nose was red. She never ever wants him to get hurt. She wants to protect him, this gentle giant. She wants to be his constant.

Rey exchanges a kiss with him.

And another.

And then another.

To let him know that this won't be their last.

I sit and I stare at your clothes in the drawer
I cry and my knuckles get sore
'Cause I still believe it won't be like before
Now somehow I just want you more

I want you more
Somehow I just want you more
I want you more
Somehow I just want you more

And when you decide it's your time to arrive
I've loved you for all of my life
And nothing could stop me from giving a try
I've loved you for all of my life

— More by Halsey